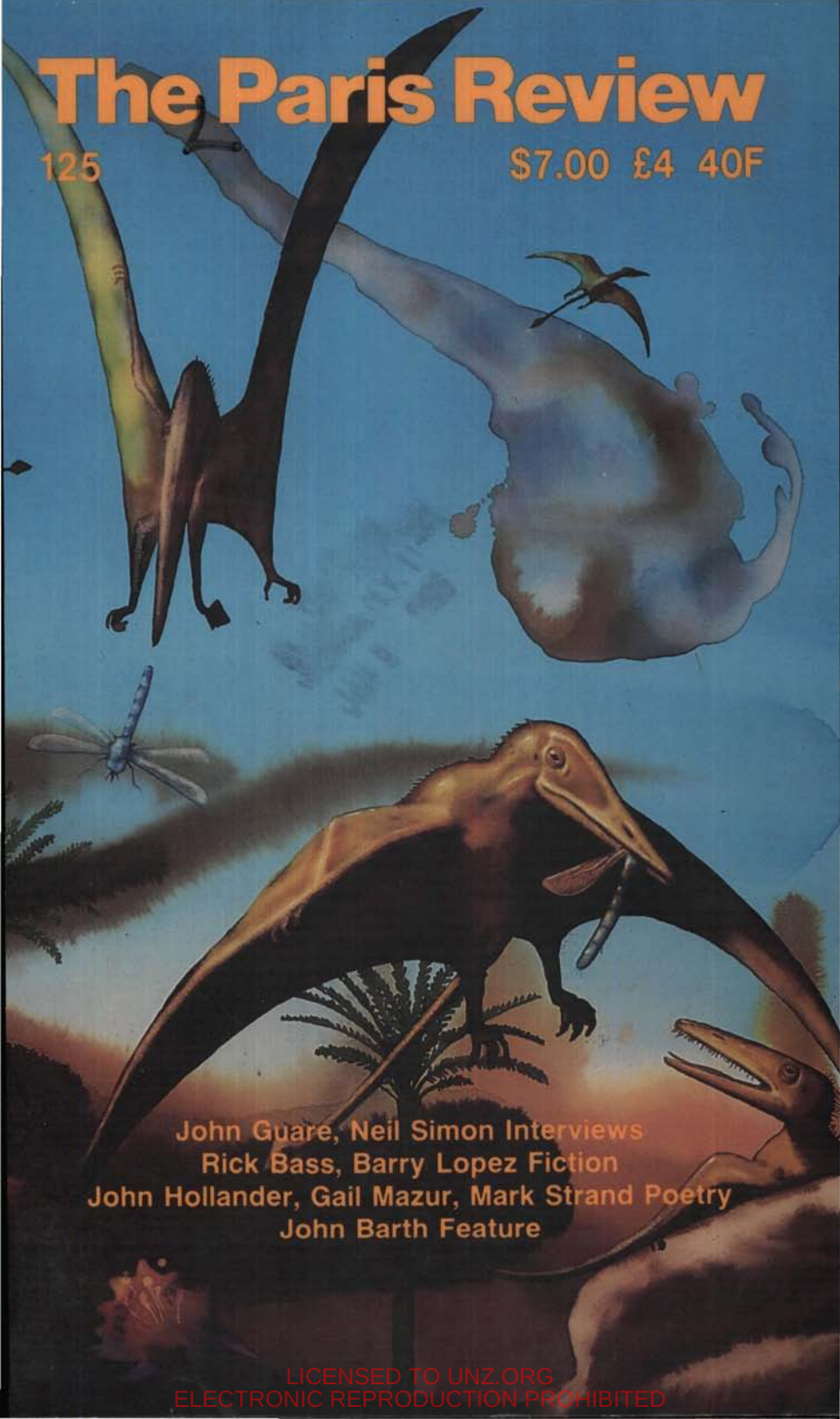
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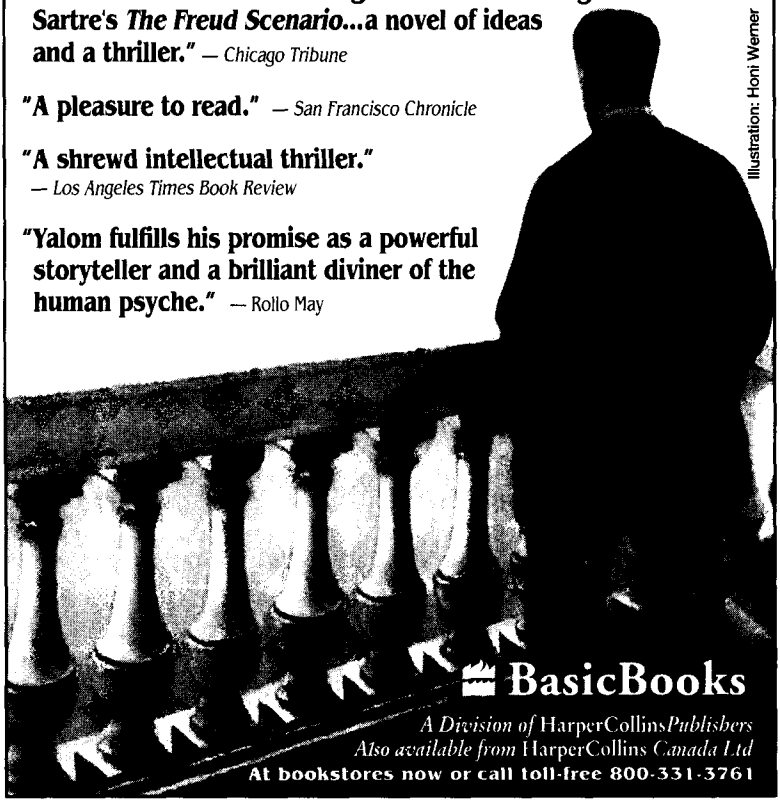


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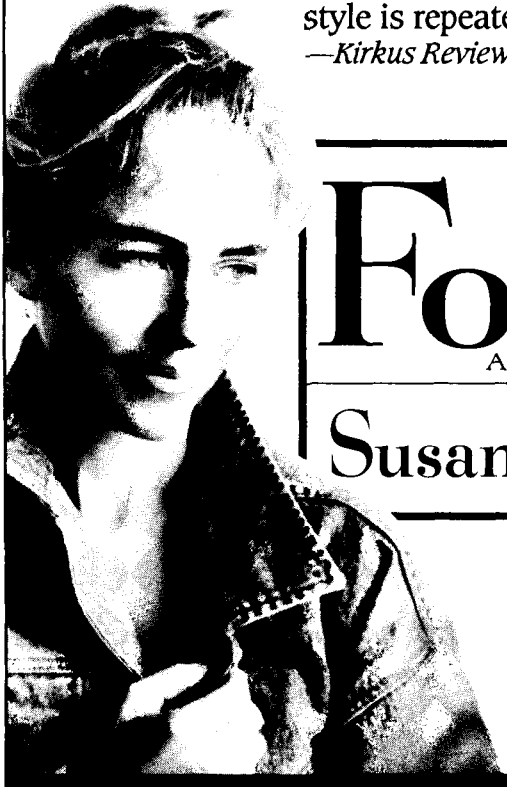
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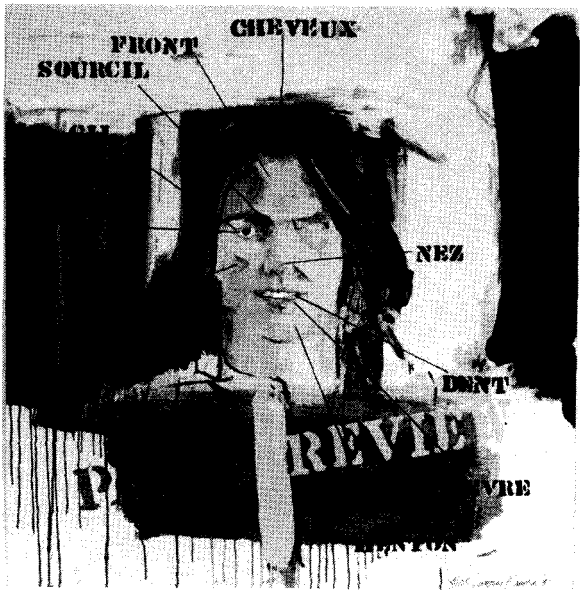
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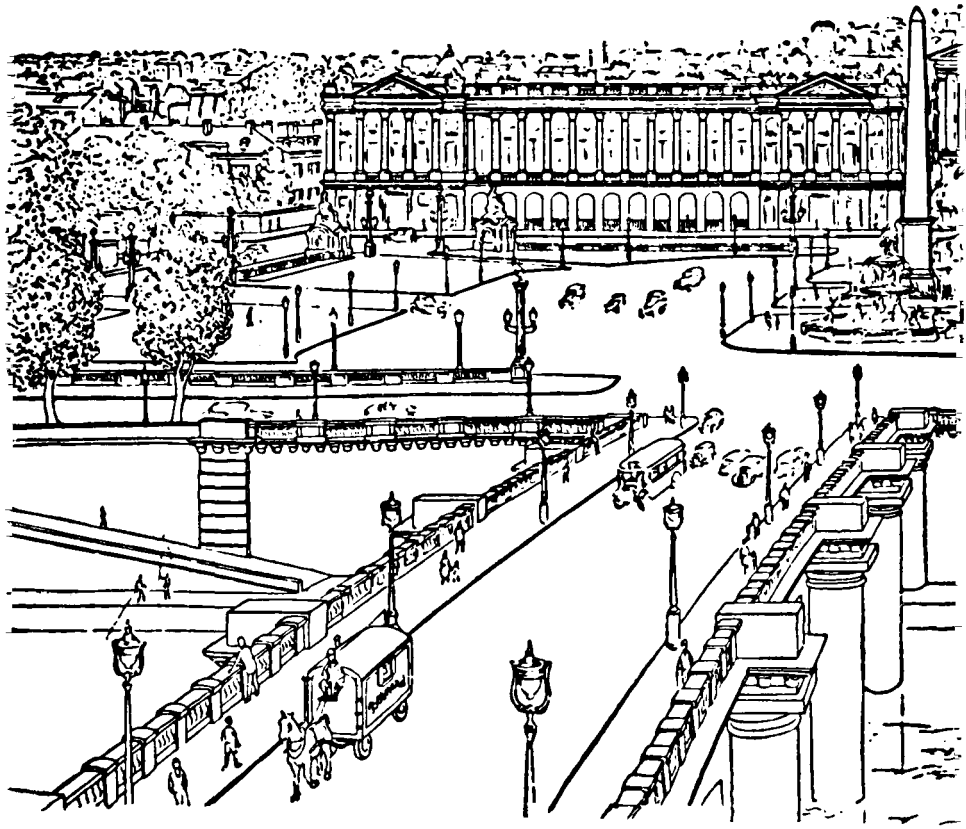
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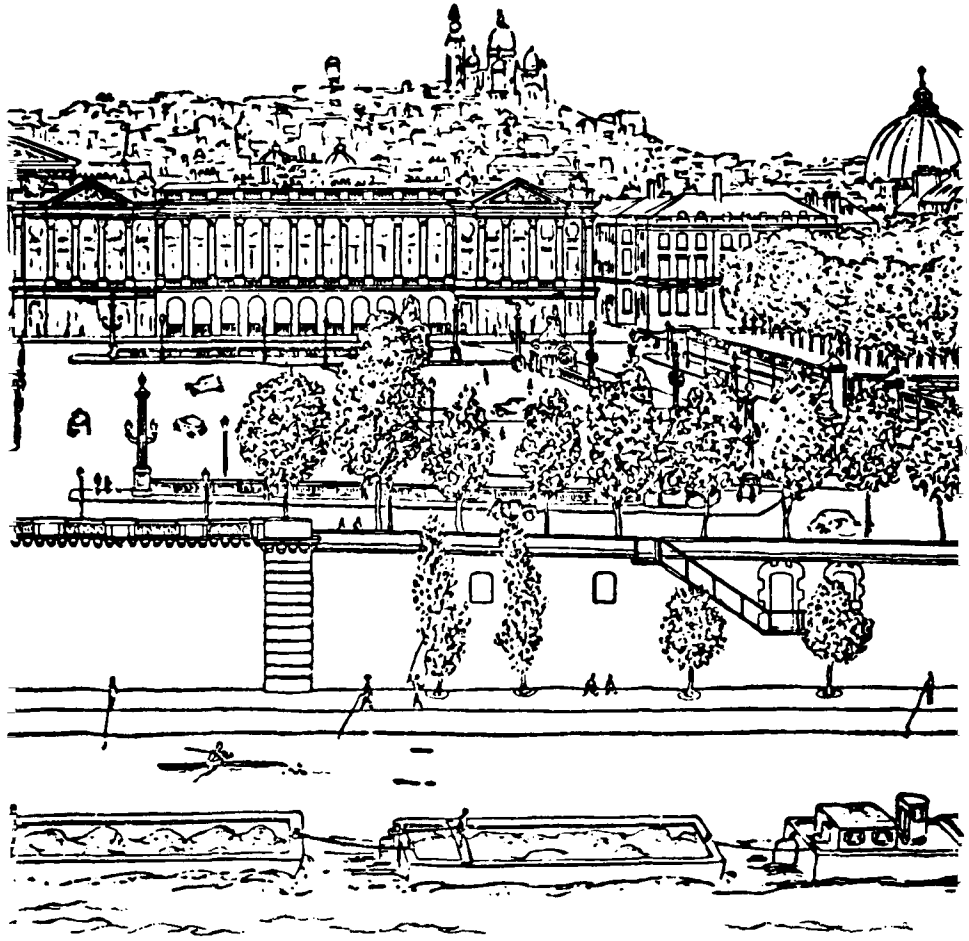
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Spinach

Dan Leone

The name is Stamps. Not mine, his. Steven Stamps to be exact is the name, but folks around here, which is Tucson, A-Z, prefer calling him as Bluto on account of what he keeps in his shoe, on account of the story goes along with it. His story, not mine. My story is quite a bit different.

What's in the shoe, and has been there coming on thirty years, so you have some idea what it likely smells like by now, is a black and white picture. In his shoe. And this picture, in case you ain't seen it yet, which case you must've just got in town two-three minutes ago, while he was asleep there with his head on the wall out there and didn't see you, dreaming about your-guess-is-as-good-as-mine; well, anyways, this here picture is a old photograph, circa 1961, of Bluto's ex-wife, the late and extremely wonderful, beautiful, honorable, good singer and generally good-natured Mary Ann Stamps. The only photograph of its kind, I might add, meaning the only one Bluto or me or anyone we know about has got with her in it, her being the late and so on Mary Ann Stamps.

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The place of the picture is Alma, Arkansas, which is known as the Spinach Capital of the World. Alma, Arkansas. The people of the picture is Mary Ann, young Mary Ann, standing in front of the Alma Spinach Cannery with her arm around Popeye, meaning the life-size plaster and paint likeness thereof, which, far as I know, is still standing out front of the cannery, still being fresh painted every April or so by Corky Parm, still welcoming people off Highway 71 to the Spinach Capital of the World.

Yes, sir . . . Popeye the Sailor Man . . . that Popeye look on his face, the pipe, the pants, the forearms, holding up a can—you guessed it—a can of spinach. Mary Ann has got her arm around all this, and she is smiling and happy. Who wouldn't be? Two days before, she got married up in Buffalo, where she and him come from, and was subsequently on her way with him to Mexico for a honeymoon. And behind the brand-new wedding-present camera was a dashing young man, equally attractive as her back then, believe it or not: Steven Stamps. Bluto.

What our Bluto says now, and what he's been telling to people for coming on three decades now, upon showing to them this here picture, is that Popeye stole his girl, see, and here is the proof—the picture—which is how he come to be known as Bluto in the first place, instead of his real name, which is Steven. Truth is, if Mary Ann got herself left behind in Alma, Arkansas thirty years ago and on the same exact day as this picture, it wasn't Popeye the Sailor Man's fault no more than it was mine or yours. If she got left there all alone with I-mean-nothing but the clothes off her back—which she did—then that's because Bluto himself done her dirty. Of course, he'll tell you she had it coming to her, on account of a big fight they had over some fried chicken, and there was a fight, but that ain't why he left her no more than Popeye is. He lost his head and bailed out is what. The boy flat out chickened out on being married, way I seen it, which is something I could almost understand in a guy, on account of I did almost the same exact thing a year or so later.

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Why am I telling you this? Because it's the only love story I know—that's why. It's the only real-life love story I know of. And I happen to be in it. I was born and brought up in the Spinach Capital of the World, you realize, and in 1961 I was pulling levers at the Alma cannery, like everyone else I knew. And it was Monday, which was—along with Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday—my day for eating fried chicken dinners at The Shack, Alma's noted eating establishment, right off Highway 71, right off Interstate 40, directly across from the cannery.

It was Monday. Steven and Mary Ann were sitting at a table by the window when I come in after work. They'd already ordered, but didn't have food yet. I sat down and ordered the same thing as what they had ordered: fried chicken. Biscuits and corn.

"You want some spinach?"

Hell no. Nobody eats spinach in the Spinach Capital of the World. But *they* ordered spinach—that's how I come to know them as being from Buffalo, or at least not Alma, Arkansas.

That and the camera, which was setting on the table in between them, like a game of chess. They were both looking at it . . . staring at it and not saying nothing, like they already come to realize that only one of them was going to wind up leaving this little Arkansas town. It had to be building up. You know—right? It had to come out of somewhere.

Shortly after the chicken come is when they commence to fight, but first let me tell you what they looked like before things got ugly, which was like this: they were young and they were beautiful. He had that greased-back black hair like guys from the city had it in them days. Clean white shirt. Black leather jacket. She had black hair, too, black like you ain't seen black except if you been in the desert like I have at night. No moon. And movie-star eyes. They were made for each other, these two, and they knew it. Hell, I knew it, too. All you had

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to do was look at them, and you knew it. I reckon all they had to do was just look at each other.

So they been high school sweethearts up in Buffalo and just got married two days prior, never even been outside of New York and maybe P-A until now. I found all this out later. They were taking the scenic route, 71, through the Ozark Mountains that day, and Mary Ann a hundred percent loving every minute of it. Thought she'd died and gone to heaven, she told me. Told me she was actually pinching herself, and that she almost passed out . . . stuff like that.

Steven was meantime just driving and not saying anything or in any way sharing in Mary Ann's pinching herself on account of the sight-seeing and almost passing out and so on, which she at the time attributed to his concentrating on the road, the road being curvaceous and mountainous in that region.

And then they commence to get hungry, the next town being Alma, and one thing leading to another like I already described it until finally their fried chicken was served, which is when the fighting got under way and transpired as follows:

Mary Ann said the chicken was the best fried chicken in the history of the world. (Which is true, by the way.)

Steven said really? He didn't think it was all that great.

Mary Ann said what are you talking about?

Steven said his mother's fried chicken was the best fried chicken in the history of the world.

Mary Ann said really? She didn't like his mother's fried chicken at all it was too greasy she just ate it to be polite.

Steven said you bitch you are out of your mind.

Mary Ann said what the hell has got into you?

Steven said me? What the hell has got into you? You haven't been yourself last couple days.

Mary Ann said me? *You* haven't been yourself last couple days you're crazy what the hell has got into me?!

Steven said don't make a scene.

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Mary Ann said *you* don't make a scene.

Then they both commence to start throwing fried chicken at each other.

The waitress, the cook, nobody in the place, myself included, knew what . . . we were all just looking, like we were watching a movie or something. Then when he finally realizes everyone is looking at them, Steven stands up, says, "Let's go."

"I'm not going anywhere until you apologize to me," Mary Ann says. She was crying now . . . there was a piece of chicken in her hair. "You're my husband, goddamn it," she says. "I'm your wife. We're married."

Steven, he puts some money down on the table . . . puts some money down on the table, and he says real quiet and friendly-like: "Let's go, Mary Ann."

And she don't answer. Got her face in her hands and she's flat-out wailing at this point.

Steven waited a few seconds, and I mean *seconds,* and then he turned around and left. We all heard it and seen it: the car door slamming, the engine starting up, the tires kicking up some gravel. And all of a sudden he's gone. Only two days after saying they do. Just drove away and left her there, just like that . . . crying her eyeballs out like a baby.

"Jesus Christ," the waitress said, not being able like the rest of us to believe what she just seen. "That son-of-a-bitch." And she gone over to their table and took the chicken out of Mary Ann's hair.

Everyone was saying he'll be back. Don't worry.

I didn't know whether or not he'd be back or not . . . but I did know a couple of things, which were one, I was going to be there for the whole episode, one way or the other, and, two, I felt sorry for the girl and kind of liked her, too, which is easy enough to admit now, thirty years later and four big states away, on account of all else that has transpired since; but at the time I was allowing that I just felt sorry for her. I said he would be back just like everyone else was saying, and I don't pretend to know

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what they were all thinking, but I was thinking: please don't come back. Please don't come back. Please don't come back.

He didn't come back.

I'd finished up on my chicken, ate dessert maybe three-four times and drank about enough coffee to keep the entire night shift awake down the cannery. And then it was eleven o'clock. Closing time.

I was already sitting with her by then.

"If he don't come back," I'd said, pulling up a chair, being systematically careful not to sit in his, "I am hereby officially offering to drive you home. Where you live?" I was thinking, Kansas City, St. Louis . . .

She said Buffalo.

I stammered this way and that for a minute and finally said something to the effect of Alma, Arkansas not being all that half bad a place to live in once you got used to it.

She smiled, and I said, "I will take you to Buffalo."

"Thank you," she said.

"But he'll be back," I said. "Don't worry. But if he don't come back," I said, "on the outside chance that he don't come back, I will drive you to Buffalo."

You realize I didn't have a driver's license or exactly a car while I was saying all this, although I could've probably come up with something.

"And if you need a place to stay tonight, I'm offering to put you up," I says to her. "I got a sofa bed. It ain't too far from here."

"Thank you," she said. She said thank you. Like it was me doing her the favor . . . which it was, technically speaking.

"We can put a note on the door here," I says, "case he come back during the night."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Name's Chuck," I said.

"I'm Mary Ann."

"He seems like a really nice fellow," I says, "like a fine

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young gentleman—I mean that. I mean, I know you were having some troublesome times there, but I reckon he'll be back shortly. What's his name?"

"Steven," she said.

I wrote "Dear Steven" on a napkin. "Case you come back," I wrote, "Mary Ann is staying at . . ." and I commence to describe to him where she was staying at, which is where I live, at the time.

"I like the Ozark Mountains," Mary Ann said.

"That's the spirit," I said.

We put the note up on the door of The Shack, but Steven never come back. The most anyone in Alma ever heard from him again was that the restaurant begun to get photographs in the mail addressed to Mary Ann Stamps c/o The Shack, Alma, Arkansas, no zip. No explanation. Nothing. The photographs being pictures of each state's welcome-to sign along the highway. In other words: WELCOME TO OKLAHOMA. WELCOME TO TEXAS. WELCOME TO NEW MEXICO. WELCOME TO ARIZONA. And then the last one she received was TUCSON CITY LIMITS and then nothing after that, so we just reckoned that was where he wound up and still was: Tucson. Which turned out to be right, as you can see for yourself.

Well, time eventually passed, with her still staying on my couch, and Mary Ann did not ask to go back to Buffalo. Her folks shipped down some of her stuff and belongings, like clothes and books and general stuff like that, and she got herself a job teaching music at Alma's grammar school. Turns out she could play the piano and sing, which was more than anyone else in Alma could say for themselves. And she used to every now and again take me down the school with her at night and play the piano and sing for me . . . not "fifteen miles on the Erie Canal" either or "for beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain" or anything like that, like I reckon she sung with the children, but different songs. Songs you might be likely to hear in a dance hall or on the radio. Love songs. After a while I commence to start

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getting some ideas in my head, which was already there to begin with, in between you and me. I loved her. Maybe *she* was getting the ideas, I don't know, but I loved her more than anything I ever loved up to then, including the fried chicken at The Shack, which we'd been knocking off together regular—but not as regular as I been knocking it off before all this happened, Mary Ann being also good at cooking and more than happy to do so on account of staying at my apartment and all.

What I'm trying to get at is that middle of the night one night, while I'm dreaming about spinach, that being what you dream about in Alma, if you're working, Mary Ann commence to come up off the couch and into bed with me.

"Chuck?" she said. "Oh, Chuck," she said, with her hand on my chest, as I recall. "Wake up, Chuck. We're in love." She loved me, see.

Understand this: we weren't made for each other, me and her. I was nothing like Steven and I was nothing like Mary Ann. First off, I was a country boy. Like I said, I was born and brought up in Alma. When my folks moved to Little Rock, I stayed in Alma on account of, one, I already had a job at the cannery, and two, I was in love—dead serious—with the fried chicken at The Shack. Which reminds me of a joke of mine, goes like this: every now and again somebody come in here from the university or something talking about this book and that one. Always reading a book—you know the type. Then they say, "You like poetry, Chuck?" I say, "Yes." Then they say, "Well, what kind of poetry you like?" And I say, "Chicken. Deep-fried. That's the only kind of poultry I know." That's the joke.

Another thing is that I was not good looking, not even in 1961. Mary Ann and Steven could've stepped right out of the movies, like I maybe mentioned already, but I couldn't've stepped out of anything. Big and freckled. Sandy, wavy hair.

So what did I have going for me? I don't know, except

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that I was there, for one thing, and I'm a nice enough guy, which you like to think accounts for something. Well, I reckon it did, on account of there was Mary Ann in bed with me, saying we was in love. And me thinking: we sure as hell are. . . .

Now, Mary Ann had been in contact with Mrs. Stamps, Steven's mother, his father being already long dead on account of brain tumors; and, anyways . . . she, the mother, had even less of a idea than we did as to Steven's situation and/or whereabouts. Mrs. Stamps, being generally a good-natured and generous woman, far as I could make out, was embarrassed sick over her son's irresponsible and unexplained disappearance, and always offering to help out . . . even send down some money if she needed it, but Mary Ann said no.

Then, after we been in love together a couple, two-three months, Mary Ann starts coming up with some fancy and fine-sounding ideas about me and her building us a log cabin up in the mountains, which sounded like a fine idea to me, long as we had a car to get to The Shack with. The only other thing being, of course, that she was a married woman, technically speaking.

Then Mary Ann commence to start talking to friends of hers in New York, friends who had friends who were lawyers and such, and they had us seeing it this way: that after a certain allowance of time—one year, to be exact—without her hearing from Steven and also not even knowing his whereabouts, Mary Ann would be considered by law as "abandoned" and could then commence to divorce him plus or minus him having any input on the subject. Then we, meaning me and her, could get married, which we were planning on doing but hadn't allowed exactly one year yet, before which some sad news come down from Buffalo.

Mrs. Stamps had been killed in a all-of-a-sudden and awful way, meaning a car crash.

Now Mr. Stamps being already dead, and what with Steven missing in action, so to speak, and Mary Ann all

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the while still officially married to him, after all, there was being sent to her, Mrs. Steven Stamps, a check for the settlement of the estate, which was not a earth-shaking amount of money, but it was a amount of money, which is always a nice thing to have sent you, you figure.

Mary Ann was crushed. "I can't believe I said that about her fried chicken," she said. We were sitting at the table and the letter stating all this news was setting on the table in between us. Mary Ann was crying her eyeballs out.

"Poor woman," I said.

"I can't believe I said that about her fried chicken," she says again.

"There, there," I says.

"She was a good cook," says Mary Ann. "She was a really good cook."

"I'm sure she was, honey," I said, and so on, until I was up and over by her, hugging her hard as I could while she cried her eyeballs out into my stomach. "I love you, Mary Ann," I says.

"I love you, too," she says, "Chuck." And then I commence to start crying in my own right, crying right along with her.

Here was the thing: Mary Ann, being all them things I said she was earlier, and add to that philosophical, she didn't want nothing to do with this amount of money being sent her. Far as she was concerned, this here amount of money belonged rightfully and especially to Steven, and as long as his whereabouts were findable, she reckoned, he ought to be found and given it, the philosophy behind which being that if she was already intending to be not married to him in order to marry me, which she was, then it wouldn't sit right to be on the other hand receiving this here money on account of still being married to him. "Can't have it both ways," she said.

Personally, I had a different philosophy on the subject, but I also believed it to be Mary Ann's own business. Also, I could kind of part ways follow her line of reason-

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ing on it. You can't have it both ways. Well, she could've had it both ways, technically, only she didn't want to, and I had to respect that, even if I didn't understand it. Truth is, I loved this woman by now more than I could ever even explain it to you, as you already know, and nothing meant more to me than that, including said amount of money.

Well, she chewed on it for some time before she come up with a plan, and this is what she come up with: she would cash the check, and I would take the money to Tucson, dipping into it as needed for travel expenses and such, the idea being to make every attempt at locating Steven's whereabouts and then to subsequently and simultaneously inform him of his mother's passing and hand over the amount of money, rightfully his. After which I would return to Alma, Arkansas, the Spinach Capital of the World, and marry Mary Ann, not to mention living happy-ever-after with her in a log cabin in the mountains. With a car.

If I couldn't locate him in Tucson, I was to systematically follow up on any and all information I was able to find out about where else he might be, which included going there in person and looking for him until I reached the end of the line, the line being the last knowable information regarding his whereabouts, at which point I was to take the amount of money, whatever was left of it, and symbolically deposit it in his name at the nearest bank . . . whatever city I happen to be in when his trail stops. After which I would head back home to Mary Ann and happy-ever-after and so on.

Way I seen it, I couldn't lose. I had to give up my lever-pulling job at the cannery, but that was first off highly re-gettable, and secondly, after however many years of canning spinach five days a week, I reckoned I was overdue for some adventure. . . . The other thing being that I was more than happy to be the one doing the delivering, in spite of it was her idea, on account of reasons I already spelled out for you. Like I said, these

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two were made for each other in a way that we flat-out were not. They belonged together like pigs and mud, and I knew it; whereas we were more like pigs and, I don't know, iced tea or poetry. So if it was her making the delivery, well, supposing she actually found him? What then? Them being made for each other, like I said.

That's why I was happy not to worry about it, because it was me on that bus, watching them same exact signs pass by which he had sent back pictures of: WELCOME TO OKLAHOMA. WELCOME TO TEXAS. WELCOME TO NEW MEXICO. WELCOME TO ARIZONA. TUCSON CITY LIMITS.

Populationally speaking, Tucson is a big enough city, especially in comparison/contrast with a place like Alma. There's maybe four-five hundred thousand people these days, which is a lot of people, especially if you think about it. On the other hand, there's a awful lot of space out here for them to live in, so it can seem pretty small, more so than it is. The streets are long and wide. You can walk around downtown on a Sunday afternoon, for example, and only see four people and probably know maybe three of them. That's how it is now. In the early sixties it was even smaller-seeming, which made my job that much more reasonable.

I called up Mary Ann soon as I come into town, commencing to tell her where I was staying at, which was the Hotel Congress, directly across from the bus terminal. I then explained to her how I had had a good trip and was itching to get started on the looking-for, come tomorrow, and so on.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you, too," she said.

And we hung up.

Want to hear something sad? That was the very last time ever we spoke them words to each other, much as I loved speaking them, and much as I loved hearing them spoken by her in reference to me. And true as they were.

What happened next is that I went to sleep in my paid-for hotel room and woke up the very next morning

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early, at which point I commence to start looking for Steven and/or his whereabouts. Turns out not only had he been there, as reckoned by me and Mary Ann, and not only did most everybody I come across recognize who it was I was talking about, but also they known him to still be there, as well as where to find his whereabouts: in the desert.

Word was he'd messed up his car a ways outside of town, at which time he commence to come into Tucson by foot, acquire himself a room at the selfsame Hotel Congress and generally run out of money by way of drinking himself nutty in the hotel's taproom, as well as several other local establishments, until he was not only flat-out broke but, by all accounts, one hundred percent insane and haywire. If I wanted to find out his location, they all said, I was to drive out about fifteen miles west on Interstate 10, on into the desert. And a fellow going by the name of "Biker," a former drinking buddy and personal friend to "Bluto," as he called him, even offered to drive me there. "I go out there once a week or so," this guy Biker says, "see if he needs anything, or if maybe he come around."

"What's he eat?" I says to Biker. We were in Biker's car, traveling west on 10.

"He don't eat much," this Biker says. "People stop and give him something," he says. "Take his picture, try and talk to him. He's well-known along this stretch of highway here, your friend," he says, and he then commence to refer to Steven as "Cactus Man."

"Cactus Man?"

"You'll see," this Biker says. "The man is pretty far gone," he says. "It's about time someone come to claim him."

"I didn't come to claim him, exactly," I explained to this Biker fellow, commencing to get more and more nervous concerning the mental and philosophical condition of Steven Stamps, alias Bluto, alias Cactus Man. I then commence to confide how I was delivering a un-

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happy message to Steven having to do with the passing of his mother by way of a sudden and unexpected car accident. I also mentioned in passing phase two of my mission, wherein I hand over to Steven a certain amount of inheritance money, and just around that time exactly, don't this here Biker fellow swerve off the highway and into the breakdown lane, screeching the car to a complete and total stop and causing me to all of a sudden regret ever mentioning said amount of money to a guy I just hardly know named Biker, not to mention in *his* car and in the middle of the desert.

Then I seen him: Steven. Bluto. Cactus Man. He was standing all alone out there a couple hundred feet from the highway, just standing there under the sun and simultaneously holding up in the air both of his arms, them being bent at the elbows, and the whole picture being a fairly accurate imitation of the saguaro-style cactus you find in the desert this part of the country.

"Here's our man," says Biker, getting out of the car.

"Biker," I says, myself getting out of my side of the car and all the while keeping both eyes on yonder Steven–Bluto–Cactus-Man. "Biker," I says, "how you reckon this here news of mine is bound to go over with him?"

"He can't get too much worse off than what he already is," Biker says as we commence to begin walking towards him.

I'd never been to the desert before this, leastwise not this kind of western-style desert, and I'd always reckoned it to be mostly sand on account of misinformation I must've received in school; but what I was unexpectedly walking upon for the first time turns out was actually hard and stony ground, which I liked the sound of . . . crunching under my feet. I was on solid ground. I was on ground that wouldn't give, and looking down at my feet, thinking the thoughts I was thinking, that whatever else might happen, at least I knew I wasn't going to sink; well, it distracted me from the general unease and nervousness I already said was building up inside of me: thinking

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maybe I should've called Mary Ann before I come out here, knowing his condition, in case she so chose to do anything different-wise, like bring him back with me or else put him in a institution. On account of her being all them things I mentioned earlier, in addition to philosophical, I didn't reckon just leaving him out there off his rocker in the desert would sit any better with her than keeping the money would've sat. These were the things been tugging at me all along, and from what the solid ground and its crunchy nature were now distracting me, like I said.

"Hey, Bluto," Biker said. We were there.

I looked up and seen him. "Hi, Bike," Bluto says, looking exactly like a crazy man in the desert would be reckoned to look. His formerly slick black hair was become long, dirty and drier than peanuts, and his clothes was hanging on him like they probably hung on hangers, meaning limp, lifeless. His face, meantime, was dirty as dirt and one hundred percent minus a expression. Not happy or sad or nothing. I knew him to be twenty years old, but he looked about forty. "Who's the cowboy, Bike?" he says, meaning me.

"This here's Chuck," says Biker.

"Hi, Chuck," says Bluto.

"Hi, Steven."

"How you doing, Chuck?" Bluto said.

"Pretty good," said me. "I have to talk to you though. I have something to tell you."

"Biker," Bluto says, "did Chuck ever see the picture?"

"Why don't you go ahead and show it to him," says Biker.

Bluto commence to laugh. "I'm a cactus," he says, right there in front of us. "A cactus can't show it to him."

"Come on, man," says Biker.

"It's in my shoe," Bluto says. He lifts up his left foot up off the ground a little bit, which was the first time he moved anything aside for his mouth.

I looked Biker's way and he just shrugs, so I go on over

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to Bluto and unlace the shoe, took the shoe off his foot and took out the picture. And there she was.

"Popeye stole my girl," he says. "My wife. Name's Mary Ann."

"I know," I said, and I reckon I was looking too long and hard for his taste at that picture, but I couldn't help it on account of there she was, smiling right next to Popeye the Sailor Man, and on account of it was *my* hometown, *my* girl, who I loved like I said beyond explanation and all, missing her already and wanting to get this business over with and get back to her and so on, and what was this picture doing in *his* shoe when everything in it, way I seen it, was mine? "She sent me," I says.

Bluto lifts his foot up that little bit again and says, "Put the picture back, okay?"

I put the picture back in his shoe, as instructed, and I put the shoe back on his foot and so on until it was done, and he commence to say, out of nowhere, "Did my mother die?"

I looked at Biker, and he just shrugged.

"Matter of fact," I says, "she did."

Bluto laughed. "I'm on a roll," he says. "Are you planning to marry my wife?"

I didn't say nothing to that, on account of I was speechless.

"Two for two," he says.

"That ain't why I'm here," I said, and I simultaneously dropped in the vicinity of his feet the envelope containing what was left of the amount of money, which was most all of it, being his rightful inheritance. "Your money," I said.

Well, whoever said money ain't important as everything else in the world ain't never been without it enough to know, I reckon. I could already see Bluto softening up some on account of having it again, and he took himself a minute to swallow and say, real polite and kind of quiet-like: "Thank you, Chuck," and, "Will you fellows do me a little favor?"

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"What is it?" I said.

"Take some money out of that there envelope," he says, "and go get me about ten cheeseburgers and a large Coke."

"Hell, yeah," says Biker, although I was personally inclined to start commencing my way back east soon as possible, what with Mary Ann waiting on me; whereas Biker, thinking otherwise, says, "Hell, yeah, we'll do that for you."

"Get something for yourselves, too," Bluto then says.

Which is what we done exactly. We come back with twenty cheeseburgers and three large Cokes and a couple of fifths of bourbon, and it was by this time commencing to get dark, but Bluto had us a fire going already, and was already doing what you do with a fire out in the desert—just sitting there, staring on into it.

"What happened to the cactus?" Biker said, passing around the first round of burgers.

"It's a day job," says Bluto. "And no one can see you at night, anyways. And it's too cold. And I've got money now . . ." and there then continued forth from his mouth a long list of reasons to stop being a cactus—not only at night but in general—the list lasting clear through the third round of burgers, with some of the reasons being barely audible on account of his chewing, but all of them being for the most part valid. The last reason he gave, and likewise the most reasonable, was he said, "And it's crazy." Then he said, "Yes, boys, I believe my cactus days to be over."

"That's the spirit," Biker said.

And then I was thankful we stayed on, having witnessed first-handedly the transformation of our boy Bluto from a all-the-way haywire psycho saguaro-imitating nutcase to a generally healthy and philosophically normal member of society, meaning I no longer had to worry over his condition not sitting right with Mary Ann and possibly further complicating the getting-on-with of our mutual and simultaneous plans, them being one, getting married and two, so on.

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Another thing was I come to realize how much in fact I actually like this here western-style desert. I loved the ground and I loved the night sky . . . and I loved watching the saguaros dancing around in the light from the fire, all happy-like, like little children, only bigger. I reckon the desert hit me same way as the Ozark Mountains must've hit Mary Ann. It was love at first sight. I wanted to live there.

We'd already done knocked off all the burgers and Cokes and roughly half of two fifths of bourbon, just talking about this and about that, what normal people talk about, you know: life. And then Biker, having a job somewhere working the night shift, had to get going and subsequently got going while meantime I had passed out, and Bluto tended the fire.

You realize I had seriously and all out intended to get back to Arkansas and Mary Ann and so on soon as possible, seeing as my mission was already above and beyond accomplished, way I seen it, what with Bluto not only having his news and money but being cured from his mental and philosophical craziness as well. But one thing led to another, however, commencing with the coming back of Biker after work next morning with two more fifths of bourbon, a cooler filled with beer and three cowboy hats.

Two years later I was still in the desert, Biker and his car having long since moved to Phoenix together, leaving Bluto and myself—the best of friends, inseparable comrades, kindred spirits and so on and so forth—to take turns hitchhiking into town for supplies and the like, meaning mostly liquor, water and food, except we also went ahead and splurged on a couple of luxurious items: sleeping bags, a change of clothes, a harmonica, a guitar and a frying pan. We had us as well a five-gallon bucket Biker left behind which we'd fill it up with water each trip into town. Then we'd let it set out all day in the sun, and later that evening one or the other of us would have us a shower, the other one standing atop the cooler, slowly and gradually emptying this bucket over his head.

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In this way, and in others like it, we were having what you would have to call the time of our life, just staring into the fire, drinking, philosophizing, eating beans and other styles of food we reckoned real cowboys to have eaten and yodeling all night until we'd gone ahead and either lost our voice or else first just flat out got spooked by the sound of it.

One time early on we talked about Mary Ann and how much we both loved and missed her and what her qualities were, and then I asked Bluto his opinion on something I already told you was puzzling me: why did he reckon a lady with her qualities and being the type of woman she was, which wasn't mine, would up and fall in love with me in the first place, my lack of good looks notwithstanding?

"Why do you think?" Bluto said.

"My theory," I said, "is that I am a nice guy and a generally good person and that that accounts for something after all."

"You want to know what I think?" he says. "I'll tell you what I think, if you promise not to take it personal."

"Okay," I says.

"She loves you," he says, "because you're the opposite of me and because she hates me for doing her dirty. It doesn't have anything to do with what you are, but what you aren't."

I commence to start taking it personal, but then I did some pondering on what I was and wasn't, the outcome of which was me not being able to tell the difference in between the two, when it come right down to it. I was ugly, for example, and I wasn't good-looking. Same thing. I was friendly, and I was not un-friendly. And so on, until I couldn't've took what Bluto said personal even if I wanted to, on account of it not meaning anything at all, way I seen it.

That same night Bluto went ahead and asked me the big and obvious question, like this: "Will you be going back to her soon?"

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This was early on, like I said—maybe two-three weeks into our desert days is all . . . shortly after Biker left us, in other words, and back when there was still a reasonable possibility for me going home. I was lying on my back by the fire at the time, and there was a half-empty bottle balancing upon my stomach, with the desert sky all spread out in front of me. I was all focused in on a star, which I liked to engage in this time of night, being just before dawn. What I'd do, I'd pick me a star and try and stare it down, the object being to stay awake just long enough to watch this here star disappear into blue sky, until it was all the way and completely gone. Sometimes I would win, and sometimes the star would win.

"Bluto," I says, "in between me and you, I want to go back to her. I want to be getting back there so bad I am all out and one hundred percent *afraid* of how bad I want to be getting back to her."

"Don't worry," Bluto says, across the fire from me and poking at it with a stick. "I won't tell nobody."

"Well," I says, "it's like this . . ." And I then sat up and commence to confide to him my whole entire life story, starting out with how I was born and then grew up and never having no brothers or sisters, and how I never had no girlfriends, on account of this and that . . . not knowing what all this had, if anything, to do with the issue at hand, but reckoning maybe if I just kept talking on it for long enough, it would eventually come down to something. Truth is, I didn't know why I was poking around in this here fire cowboy-style with Bluto every night when I could've been back home getting married and eating fried chicken.

It occurred to me later on, not while I was laying it all on Bluto that night, which I'll get back to in a minute, that before I ever begun all-the-time dreaming about Mary Ann, much as she was on my awake-time mind, I first commence to dream about the other thing: the chicken. Every time I went to sleep, that was all I dreamed about was fried chicken at The Shack. Then,

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after the first whole year or so gone by without me ever up and going back, and once it was by my reckoning too late to do so without suffering from certain consequences, that's when I commence to start all-the-time dreaming her: Mary Ann. Mary Ann. Mary Ann.

Sometimes she'd be crying her eyeballs out in these dreams, and sometimes she'd be other handedly happy and cheerful, with either way amounting to me feeling deeply and all around regretful, not to mention sorry and sad—but this was only while I was dreaming and inside of the dreams that I was feeling suchwise. While I was awake, I was one hundred percent fine and okay and still having the general time of my life, except that I begun looking closer at the cars going by on the highway, now and again and halfway thinking on the possibility that maybe there was a chance she'd come after me and my whereabouts, just like I come after him and his, and likewise find me and either take me away with her or maybe even stay on and be with us, but of course none of them kinds of things was going to happen.

Anyways, seeing how this here reckoning and transpiring took many years to come by and transpire, respectively, it was not included in my original discussion on the issue that I was trying to explain to Bluto, as well as myself, early on in our desert days. Instead, I that night come out with my whole entire life story, simultaneously hitting the bottle and poking the stick around in the fire until finally I conclusioned and summarized by saying, "I don't know why I'm still here. How about you?"

But Bluto already fell asleep while I was still talking, what with his chin down on his chest and his stick no longer poking but just setting there in the fire, on fire and fuse-like, commencing to burn his hand except for and on account of me having the presence of mind to let him go of it for him.

We didn't talk much more about Mary Ann and going back after that and instead went back to philosophizing about altogether different kinds of things. That and eat-

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ing beans and so on. This went on, like I said, for roughly two years. And then one day the money run out, which is exactly when and why we finally gathered up what little earth-wise possessions we had and caught us a ride back into the city. Tucson, A–Z. Which, on account of the fine weather, is not a bad place to be homeless in, if you got to be homeless somewhere.

I reckon I preferred the desert, if it come down to it, and I reckon I'd've been every bit as well-off if I was back in Alma. . . . But, anyways . . .

Bluto, on the other hand, being a city boy at heart, fit in natural and easy to the city lifestyle. He was everybody's best buddy back then, starting out with the showing them of the picture in his shoe—how Popeye stole his girl. Then when it come around to names and he'd say: "Call me Bluto" . . . well, you had to love him.

He'll still show you that picture, too, thirty years more-or-less later, but people just ain't interested in them kind of pictures anymore. Only thing'll perk up most folks these days is if Mary Ann were naked in it, or Popeye, depending on the looker. There's no audience anymore for a honest-to-God picture of a decent woman and a decent sailor in a decent small town in Arkansas. Except for me.

I could have gone back to Arkansas. I could have any time gone back there, you realize, easy as rubber-heeling it on out as far as the highway and holding up my thumb. But on top of everything else, which is why I wasn't already there in the first place, I was afraid of some new things, like, on account of the passage of time, Mary Ann would beat the shit out of me, for example, or worse yet, she wouldn't. Or maybe she got tired waiting around and married some other spinach-canning freckle-face fried-chicken-loving and fine upstanding resident of Alma, Arkansas.

But even though I never tried calling her up or otherwise getting in touch with her for communicational purposes, she was all-the-time on my mind, believe it or not.

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She was on Bluto's mind, too, except in a entirely different kind of way, like she was in that picture of his: more of a novelty than a genuine, real-life dilemma. There was never any question about him going back.

Well, about ten-fifteen years ago, back when we were both of us still on the street together, it all become irrelevant anyways. What happened is I finally run into a old Arkansas buddy of mine from the cannery, and he filled me in on some back-home news I did not want to hear, on account of what it was: Mary Ann was dead. She had in fact gave up on me, turns out, after a unsuccessful telephone-style attempt to locate my personal whereabouts and all the while no longer hearing from me, either, whereupon she rightfully commence to reckon I too had done her dirty. And she had in fact, upon reckoning such-wise, up and married somebody else and even built for themselves a cabin up in the Ozark Mountains, which was the one thing I was glad about to hear. Except that then she died, just exactly while giving birth to their second baby, which is something I don't mind saying has absolutely no business happening this day and age, with all our scientific know-how, and especially to a person as all-around good-natured and all them other things as Mary Ann was.

"Bluto," I says to Bluto, "Bluto, buddy," I says, "Bluto, I just run into a old pal of mine from Alma and heard me some awful news," I says.

And the bastard did it again. He up and outs with it: "Mary Ann is dead."

I didn't say nothing, but just shook my head on account of one, it was true, and two, I didn't know how in the hell he already knew it.

"Shit," he says, putting it mildly, and then other than that he basically took it like he took it when his mother died, which was as if it weren't nothing to get all worked up in reference to.

For me, things changed. I didn't want to be living on the street no more, for one thing, so I took me a job,

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which I still have, cleaning up rooms at the Hotel Congress. I work for room and board and a small amount of spending money, and I help out my friend Bluto when he needs it, like sneaking him into my room on rainy or cold nights, which are few and in between, and I try much as possible to keep him some food in his stomach. I would give him the clothes right off of my back if he would take them, which every now and again he does.

It's like this: I reckon I owe it to him on account of him taking care of me, financially speaking, in the beginning. I also owe it to Mary Ann on account of I let her down, and what with Bluto being the closest as I can come to her now, what with him being more like her than anyone else . . . coming from the same place and remembering some of the same memories and all. . . . And he even looks like her a little bit, I reckon, although I don't know how much of that reckoning is only in my head. For another thing, I love him.

And for one more thing, he's got that picture of her, that beautiful goddamn Popeye picture I been trying to tell you about, which will some day be mine if and when Bluto ever dies, which everybody does, I'm told. And I don't care how old or how yellow this here picture is or even what it smells like by then, being kept as it is in his shoe and so on. That picture means more to me than Bluto will ever know, on account of I am in it. You see that building yonder behind Popeye, that long gray Arkansas-style sad and sorry looking building, in contrast against which Mary Ann's last-of-the-good-times smile dances even to this day like saguaros in the light from a fire? Well, that there is Alma's spinach cannery, and I am inside of it, as you know, only much younger then, like Mary Ann, and smiling a entirely different kind of smile—more like the beginning of good times. Look closer, and you can see me through the gray. That's me. I'm pulling a lever, see, and pulling and pulling and pulling and then pulling again with one hand, smiling, and with the other hand waving at the camera, hello to

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the next thirty years or so—while meantime behind from me and on account of my pulling, portions of spinach are methodically falling into tin cans, which are methodically closed, labeled, packaged and shipped into homes all around the country, where young boys will methodically be told to eat it and shut up if they ever want to be strong.

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Three Poems by John Hollander

At the Follies

Tired now, by candlelight and in the grip
Of much undoing to be done, we strip
  Away at varnish, burn old wills and deeds,
As in our work we sew, so shall we rip.

Blind to injustice, what can you stand *for,*
Rusted and twisted your slow sword, and your
  Balance with its twin pans shot through with holes?
Astraea was a virgin. You're a whore.

High public office, for Sam, Joe and Bill
(Our leaders) yields the same old guerdons still:
  The minor thrill of public song-and-dance,
A hand in someone's pants, or in the till.

The Muse?—It's not the strange gods, but the cheap
Ones she goes whoring after; yet we keep
  Her seriously chaste with knowing laughter,
Tickling her soul so she won't fall asleep.

Faber est suae quisque fortunae (read:
"We are the shapers of our fates") Indeed?
  That feared and courted strumpet Fortune smiles,
Parcelling us out the tools she feels we need.

Our home is burning while logicians fiddle:
The stately Law of the Excluded Middle
  Must bow out now, and leave us room to breathe
Between the mad coals and the hissing griddle.

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Whose ugly effigy hangs from the rafter—
The crafty artist or the artsy crafter?
  Which of them made it? In whose image was
It fashioned? Distant Beauty dissolved in laughter.

The escalator of surprise today
Only takes you to ladies' lounjeray,
  But in the steady basement yard goods still
Can fly like words with wings and things to say.

Early Inscription

EIDLLA EW [DNA?] NROBLLA ERAEW
[Niemand's translation:
We are all born and we all die]

(Nimmerwahr, 1868) Niemand's suggested emendation, as well as his translation based on it, will plainly not do; among other things, the pure uninterpretability of the text, which alone constitutes its significance, is thereby beclouded.

(Schwartzweiss, 1869) Significance, indeed! "Sing if"-icance, only an easy transposition away, puts Nimmerwahr's whole flimsy matter more accurately . . . Mere lyrical hypothesis gets us nowhere.

(Nirgendswo, 1869) The text is quite clear, and if seemingly "uninterpretable" (thus Nimmerwahr!), only because it is merely so much a commonplace as to be trivial. Niemand's conjecture is, of course, quite sound.

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(Stillschweigend, 1870) Sound? *Sound!!!???* A ridiculous suggestion, all the more dangerous in that it invites the ill- considered judgment to agree with the reductively positive Schwartzweiss, who is, as always, incapable of grasping crucial nuance.

(Lindsay-Wolsey, 1902) There is something uncanny about Niemand's suggested syllable, which represents, after all, the only intelligible morpheme in the inscription; it is, in the old Eastwest dialect, the word for "life". Niemand of course knew nothing of this, and his suggestion is as worthless as is the controversy it has elicited. Still, the very fact that he should have introduced it, sheds some ironic light not on the "meaning" of the text but on the meaning of the conditions generating its mode of reception.

(Quackenbush, 1973) The very power of this particular fragment to elicit such particularly heavy and humorless debate from nineteenth-century German scholars usually known for their light-handedness and grace in controversy is in some way a function of the resonance of its assertion, particularly in view of the fact that it is now believed to be impossible to assert just what that assertion might be. I am reminded of how . . .

(Bertoldo, 1974) Quackenbush leads us—ha! ha!—into a quackmire. The text says what it says; the English translation from Niemand will do as well as any.

(Peterschreier, 1988) Merely to quote this sentiment [Niemand's "We are all born and we all die." ED.] is outrageous. *"We"???* This means, as usual, humans, and the whole utterance manifests the worst sort of species-ism. The assertion is an affront to other species *who can't be said to "know" that they will die.* It is a

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slippery slope from boasting of the ultimate human knowledge to asserting, vilely, mankind's hegemony over "the garden of Creation."

(Vrun-Lügner, 1990) As we now know, Niemand went wrong in not realizing that the inscription falls into two parts that are actually in two different dialects; EIDLLA EW is in the lingua franca of the North, and NROBLLA ERAEW in the form used for inscriptions in the South. Whatever the words may mean, each "half" is a paraphrase of the other. Each says the same thing. Whether, at some other level, Niemand's erroneous translation might be considered a tautology is not for us to consider.

Variations on a Fragment by Trumbull Stickney

I hear a river thro' the valley wander
Whose water runs, the song alone remaining.
A rainbow stands and summer passes under,

Flowing like silence in the light of wonder.
In the near distances it is still raining
Where now the valley fills again with thunder,

Where now the river in her wide meander,
Losing at each loop what she had been gaining,
Moves into what one might as well call yonder.

The way of the dark water is to ponder
The way the light sings as of something waning.
The far-off waterfall can sound asunder

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Stillness of distances, as if in blunder,
Tumbling over the rim of all explaining.
Water proves nothing, but can only maunder.

Shadows show nothing, but can only launder
The lovely land that sunset had been staining,
Long fields of which the falling light grows fonder.

Here summer stands while all its songs pass under,
A riverbank still time runs by, remaining.
I will remember rainbows as I wander.

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Three Poems by T.R. Hummer

Friendly Fire

Land war will require the most complex
combat flying ever flown, with more tragedies
of friendly fire inevitable.
—CNN Newscast, 2/4/91

Heraclitean, for instance: the world as a gaseous
Shimmer, like afterburner fumes in the oily night sky
Outside Carbondale, where lovers pass through the flux
Of the heart's napalm—or alchemical: the transformative image
Of the sun over Dallas, antiseptic if you could touch it,
Tritely ætherial, the volatile gold of gas-well burnoff
On the freeway's horizon, cauterizing, uncorrupting bone—
We could imagine anything. Suppose we pulled a lever
And every carburetor in Charlottesville
Detonated in a transcendental rush of vesicatory gas
And oxyacetylene? What would we think we were seeing?
What residue would remain?

I think it would be elemental.
I think it would be pure. I think it would give off the smell
Of brass, chrysanthemums, caustic old velour—
Or that strange metallic odor that drags my grandmother's face
Up from the flare of my neurons, where the innocent dead all go:
A bombed-out country no body belongs to,
untouchable, chemical, clean.

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Scrutiny

After the D&C, she stood waiting for a taxi
In the clinic awning's shade. It was afternoon in her
Comfortable little city, early rush hour. She could hear
Traffic beginning to swarm under a bloodless bisected
moon.
She was watching everything with singular attention,
Men in their wrinkled suits and skin eclipsed by sweat,
The iridescent black of grackles in the gutter, the
bright
Chrome and yellow of a 50s Lincoln at the stoplight,
The ambiguous look on the face of God, the shape of
her own hands.
And people looked back at her, she thought, with
more
Than casual regard, neither sentimental or curious,
But as if they had something disembodied
In common with her. Suddenly she understood how acts
Of attention corrode the world so the flesh feels
scraped away,
Worn thin by the action of light, by the eye.
Suddenly she desired another life, a parallel
dimension,
Translucent like our own, but in which the dial of
consciousness
Is rotated one counterclockwise click, so every mind
possesses
The body immediately to the left. At the corner of
Second Avenue
And Royal Street, she paid the driver. He watched
her as she vanished
Up the steps of the brownstone, a dominion he will
never enter,
An allegory whose other side is blankness.

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My Funny Valentine in Spanish

for Philip Levine

In the 7–11 parking lot, white boys are terrorized
By a Lincoln stereo punching out 98-decibel jazz. The scene
Reminds them unconsciously of high-art cinema shot
In ferocious blue illumination: the deep wax job
Of the Continental telegraphing the luster of the streetlights,
The stone-colored lawyer in an elegant linen jacket
Leaning on the fender while the digital self-service pump
Carries on its decisive artifice. Turned up this loud
Past midnight, Miles Davis is a cool apocalypse
Like nothing these boys on stolen skateboards ever entered,
A neighborhood in which no one remembers the depth
Of the æther where antifreeze and motor oil pool,
Or the white ghosts of congressmen obliterating angels' hairs
With their otherworldly logic. This is the music they play
In the tunnels of the underground where subways run
From Cambodia to East LA In the barrios, children speak
The subjunctive—*If this were bread, could one eat it?*—
And the love of God is a drug, like the love of death.
The *abuela* behind the 7–11 counter shuffles
And lays out the cards. Her *abuela* taught her this.
Five of clubs, three of diamonds: Every low card
Whispers its password and its alibi. There's an occult
Future here. Somebody makes it. Somebody loves somebody
And crosses the great water for a promise, on a dare.

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Rodgers & Hart. The boys on their skateboards listen
To the trumpet whose language nobody taught them.
Mi enamorada graciosa, it might be singing. *Mi corazón.*
One morning somebody wants to blast somebody's
lights
Into a pure cobalt vapor floating at the Pleiades' heart,
One morning the cash register and the Lotto machine
are eclipsed
By a mist of tear-gas–shadowed perfume, the exhaust
of the LAPD.
And one morning—Neruda made it past tense in
invincible Spanish
That could not translate Franco into hell, or contradict
The bullets that distorted Lorca—*Everything is aflame,*
One morning the fires/Come out of the earth/Devouring people.

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Carl Buchanan

Six Victims

to Diane

Mary Kelly to the Yard and Jack the Ripper
9 November 1888 London

You will not discover in my dying body's kidneys'
yield, who.
All your theory of that and the other is false. Nor is any
woman simple. We encompass men before they're
birthed
and surround them in their manhood and weave
their graveclothes, mourning the rot of what we
created.
All men of women born are,
and all women, all mankind. When you locked
the door as I turned my back to raise the gas
in a room my body buys, or bought, and my
not half-bad face, I knew you were one, Jack, a man
who understands in that special way we know
ourselves.
We are your betters. Bleeding is
our life's chore. Storing the blood cells
for timely release is a mystery
we wrap our legs around and hold
as we lock men's heads
in that worshiping position (yes death *is* birth)
as I held yours once, Jack,
before you were born perhaps,
before I named you my son (as I do now)
and out of my Curse came

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your head and those blood-filled hands
and the scream of us all,
all, all.

Emma Smith to Jack the Ripper
3 April 1888 London

What I couldn't figure was why
his face changed as he struck
me with his big knife like a club. He was a copper,
then some sort of fop who stuck me and said,
"Pig. You delight me, Pig!" As though I haven't
heard
and seen and done it, every dirty trick. But somehow
his features
dripped and fell, flexed into other clefts and juts
till his clay hands worked the blade's tip like a
paintbrush,
you know, an artist-fellow's. Re-arranged my parts, he
did,
as if he tried to see me from four sides at once, or
from
the inside. Like a loony, he was. He called
me Daughter, and I might be damned, but I thought
he did look a tad like the old man,
but then old leerers look the same, right?
Right? So how then did he put on tits
that sagged like mum's, how did he paint
himself with her own face, and ask me in her voice
if I wouldn't mind
being a good girl, stop
screaming, eat this
now, be good
or some bogeyman
will come.

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Martha Tabram to Jack the Ripper
7 August 1888 London

Sisters, sisters, we all are witches here. Brewing
something that needs blood and water, eyes and soul,
brings us together. Knitting a shroud with a name
in every stitch, a red shawl for eternity
to set off paling bones, keeps us hale.
I be only half-dead, but I share your mirror,
sisters. In the coming weeks and months
you will be sent by the killer
to mate with me in making the broth
that is perhaps only Excuse
for our chant. Our half-song, never
dying, crying as hearts wail
before the muscle makes a last fist
and splays—our song, I know, will gain
in rhythm as your crossed patterns join
with me: you, Annie; you, Elizabeth;
you, Mary; you, Martha; nameless others I can't see
in the cauldron where I pooled my eyes to gain Sight.
We have a tale to make which is a poem
of a princess born to an evil king. He slew
her mother and locked the girl in a casket shaped
like the high queen's corpse. He hung the key
at his waist, and visited her like a nightmare. The key
shone, a knife of moonlight in the dark side
of the sleeping maid. Come let us tell the song
and quicken candles with unseen breaths in every castle,
for we must cook and stir the dark truth
and the liver, and what else
we can discover, who are blind.

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Polly Nichols to Jack the Ripper
31 August 1888 London

42 years old. I've got five of 'em. My husband used to give
me five shillings, but he's dropped that
since last week, so here I am. Thirsty? Sure,
as much as a codfish. Thanks, kind sir. What's in the bag?
All right, I didn't mean a thing, you're testy,
but you're nice. Haven't I seen you, walking about here
as I do, not really to *do* anyone, if you take
my meaning, but only to walk? The long nights
hold another life, for me. It's the brats
all day, and sometimes I get a lucky customer then too,
and I've got nowhere to go and do a man
but home, and home's just the one room, and the children
stare. So how about here in the alley, this nice lane,
sort of? I lean forward, hike the curtains d'you see, now
you can get in easy, that's it, slide
it in back there, I'm always wet. It's the way
I'm made, like made for love
some gent says to me once. Not my husband,
that shit. Well go ahead and do it love.
I haven't got
all night.
Are you finished
yet?

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Annie Chapman to Jack the Ripper
8 September 1888 London

I am not your Annabel Lee. I've read Poe,
or heard him, at least, from my Da
in his cups. He liked to ring the American's bells,
bells, bells, and he swung his rum bottle
about our small room as his voice swelled
and pealed with the flying doomed souls
symbolized, I suppose, by those maddening
bells. He's in Bedlam, that's fact, what was called
Bethlehem once, shortened in name and changed in
sense.
Yes even misnamed whores can go *incogito.* That's
Latin.
I am who I make me, not men or any woman. I will
not fulfill
your ideal, nor recite for you further. I will be one
in Paradise when you lie howling, or you haunt
genteel rooms chained as a damned spirit, doubtless
seeking the virtue you have rent with your crimes.
Curse me, you, you are not
Edgar Allan, bright dome, sunken eyes, cream hands,
but I swear
I am the raven who
will sit and peck your eyes out in the night
like mournful and never ending
Remorse.

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Cathy and Liz to Jack the Ripper
30 September 1888 London

Because he paired us, both slain in one night,
we are twins in the Ripper's sky,
a sort of negative Gemini. Our sockets darken
rather than shine. About us is infinite light
but we hook hands and look lost, two dark holes
for our shoulders and two for our breasts,
two for knees, and for feet, two black eyes.
If you see us walking, perhaps as near
as Soho or M—— Street in Plymouth,
Massachusetts, know what ghosts can do—
such as lean on each other's arm, compare wounds,
swap what we first thought when asking him,
"Care to show a girl a good time?" and whether she
liked his moustache or I his broad build.
God, he was handsome, he who split me
like a fruit, but she or I says, No,
he was a brute like most of them. We argue
out the nights on the Vegas Strip, near Second Street
in Salt Lake City, and sometimes we let
gas light from 1888 shine through our bosoms
as we ask a stranger, a tall one,
"Care to give
a girl a light?"

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Two Poems by Gail Mazur

Snake in the Grass

I was embarrassed in a garter snake's presence.
—I'd screamed when it slithered under my hand
as I leaned to pick the first ripe blueberry.
It was noon, a Monday in late July. I thought
I was alone in the green world, no one but
a cool snake to observe I'm not a cool woman.
The sun, as always, was hot on my shoulders,
hot on the back of my blouse. I'd forgotten
the universe wasn't all dead pines and Indian
graves and boarded-up houses, that I wasn't
the only creature left alive in it, that I'd
never found my comfortable place inside it.
I wanted to be someone who doesn't scare,
who can't be shaken, so I wanted no witnesses
to this paradigm in the Garden. Then, the snake
slid noiselessly under the rotting porch
of our family cottage. The reduced summer woods,
the wide sky, were stunned and silent. Imagine
a silence, all you hear your own scream vanishing.
A second before, you'd knelt to the ground,
humming, and something writhed at your left hand,
wild as migraine, while your right reached
through transparent air to the first sweet berry,
treasure of asthmatic childhood's summers.
It isn't death you fear now, or years ago,
it's the sneak attack, the large hand clapped
over your mouth, bad moments that suddenly
come back when you think you're at home
in the frayed landscape you've already lost,
and a snake, a *not-you,* invisible, camouflaged
in the famished grass, jolts you out of your dream.

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Try being rational and patient:
get into your car, drive down the old road
to Dunroamin' Campgrounds. You've got a quarter—
telephone a friend, he'll probably be in
his amber-lit air-conditioned office, reading
student papers. He might say post-modernism's
days are numbered, but he'd like to get away.
Tell him not to come down to the Cape.
Tell him about the harmless snake, give him
the scream, how you blushed that one of nature's
creatures should think you're a silly woman.
Embellish a little, laugh at yourself in the hot
glass booth. There'll be kids playing volley ball
on the parched field, mosquitoes, mothers
spreading mustard on baloney sandwiches.
—Wouldn't anyone have screamed at the chill
reptilian underhand move of that snake?
Wasn't that scream waiting for years?
Can't you relent, can't you love yet
your small bewildering part in this world?

Blue

Once I thought there was no blue in nature
except the sky—I thought Nature couldn't make
a blue flower, or tree, or creature.

I was young and hadn't looked at anything—

that was before I knew delphiniums
and morning glories, before I'd heard the blue jays,
or recognized the steadfast spruce trees,

or knew about Nabokov's butterflies.

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Before my blue cat, I didn't know color
has its own vocabulary in every language:
his mother was a Russian Blue,

and often, when I'd been out a while,
the delirious syllables of his blueness
would amaze me at the door—

it's always so hard to remember color exactly . . .

His coat couldn't be described by any synonyms
or tropes for gray, not mist or fog,
not colorless, not ash—

although I've buried his ashes in the pitch-
dark shade of our yard where hot summer days
he loved to lie, happy

to be cool yet close to me,

and I'm going to plant a juniper nearby,
not really to remind me, but that every autumn
the place where he lay might be

lit by the electric-blue of its leaf.

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How to Write a Story

Laura Yeager

At the interview, they had not wanted to know about my degrees or my years of teaching experience, only about "Peace Research."

"Tell us about 'Peace Research,' " they said. I began the only way I knew how—at the beginning.

(I had applied for this job only as a last resort; I'd take it if I didn't get asked back to my current job—a temporary full-time instructor position at a small state college in Ohio. Surprisingly, like all things I don't desire deeply, the possibility of a job came to me, and I was then sitting on the eighteenth floor of the Marriott Hotel in Boston, in the chairman of the English Department's room, which had a couch, an end table and two walls of windows. Boston stood outside, gray, boxy and neat.)

"It was a large peace rally in Norway," I said. "I had not planned on going. I had never even heard of it before, but one day, I was wandering around a building I had never been in on campus. I didn't know why I was wandering around or where I would go. Suddenly, I felt compelled to go upstairs, so I walked until I found myself

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in front of a door I'd never seen—an office I'd never heard of. I opened the door and saw a sign on the wall. I wandered right up to it, saw the words, 'Peace Research, Norway,' and knew at that instant I was going to go to Norway."

"I took down the address for information, told the receptionist sitting at the desk in the office that I was going to go to this institute and left, picking up the phone at home to call my neighbor, Patty. "I'm going to Norway," I said.

"When?" she asked.

"This summer."

"What's in Norway?"

"A school. They have a course called 'Peace Research.' I'm going there."

"I had only known one thing for certain before in my life—that I was supposed to leave my childhood sweetheart—that we had to break up or I would die. My father had, the summer we had lost our virginity, committed suicide. The chronology: 1. suicide 2. loss of virginity, and I knew that I had substituted Richard for a father and that this could not continue, or I would wake up twenty years later with eight children, still a child. That night I had woken up in bed, crying 'Daddy,' knowing he was gone—gone for good and that I had to get rid of Richard. I drove home that night, called him up and told him to come over, I had something to tell him. 'I'm leaving you,' I said. 'I have to.' I shook his hand."

"Those two things I had known—that Richard and I would never make our lives together, and that I would go to Norway. I recognized the feeling."

"My interest in going to Norway was 'to study conflict in order to resolve conflict,' the blurb I had read on the advertisement. I had known all about conflict. I was a writer. Every story was supposed to have a conflict."

" 'I'd like to come to the peace conference,' I wrote, 'to learn about how to write a story.' "

"The next thing I knew I had been accepted and had

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been given a scholarship. That was good because I had no money. I had gone on faith, unnamed as such at the time, that I would get the funds. But I needed more for the airline travel."

"I began to comb the scholarship books in the International Travel Office for Graduate Students," I told the director of the English Department of a state school in Maryland. She listened, on the chair across from the couch, her hands folded in a casual but interested interview fashion.

"Finally, I found a scholarship program that sounded right. The Norwegian Group in New York offered money to worthy people who wanted to travel to Scandinavia. I wrote them only to be informed that I had missed the entry deadline. I had written what I had written to the Peace Research people: "I want to attend the school in order to understand conflict, so I can learn to write a better story."

"Two weeks after I had been dismissed because I missed the deadline, the director of The Norwegian Group called me and told me they had decided to send me to Norway, and they were sending $800 in the mail. I'd receive it soon."

"I said good-bye to Patty, telling her, 'I knew it. I knew I was going to Norway.' "

"What happened?" asked the interviewer.

"Let's put it this way. I had my first heart attack in Norway."

"Oh, really," said the interviewer.

"Not really, but I thought I was dying. I was so afraid I thought I was going to die, and I lay awake all night holding my chest, trying to breath."

"It was that bad?"

"The place was full of terrorists."

"Terrorists, at a peace conference?"

"Terrorists—all kinds, with stories to tell from their war torn countries—South Africa, Pakistan, India, Ireland. Reagan was president at the time so we were all

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stupid Americans. They hated us. They directed all their hostilities at us. I sat in lectures and listened to stories of mass burials and brothers shot and systems in South Africa meant to frustrate—the bills due two days before the paychecks arrived, the 'terrorists' who had no other choice but to retaliate. Not real terrorists, but people who had been called terrorists, people who had run out of their country on foot to avoid being executed and who now lived in Angola. People who called me 'comrade.' My best friend was a terrorist. He had seen me cry at the lectures and had said, 'You, are the only one in this room who understands justice. You are the only one who has the grace to cry.' "

"One man told me I must come to India to become strong, to learn to meditate. He organized a tour for me. 'You'll stay with nuns,' he said. He'd take care of everything, and I'd learn to meditate and gather wisdom."

"I was fearful of him and his promises. I thought that I would get to India and be in danger, that there would be no nuns, only him and India's dirt, which I had smelled because I'd read an Indian newspaper every week as an undergrad. The paper had been printed on a cheap grade of paper, and it smelled oily and dirty, and that's how I knew India would smell. In any case, at the time, I wrote him off."

"Meanwhile, the South African was pursuing me because he wanted me to join his cause, to give me something to live for, and, in the meantime, to screw me."

"This sounds like one of those peak experiences that taxes everything you know up to that point," said the interviewer.

"Yes, it was," I said. "And the whole thing was strange because it was so exotic, yet it was taking place in a plain, white, clean country with nice, quiet Norwegians as our hosts. There were people from sixty-five different countries staying at the school with the cleanest windows I had ever seen. The windows of the dormitories were cleaned every day by beautiful Norwegian student/maids, who,

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after they were done, took off their tops and lay on the grass to sunbathe. I've never seen such clean windows. And the birds never stopped singing because it was midnight sun, and one day I went to the beach and took off all my clothes and caught body lice because it was the hottest summer on record in Norway, and the funny thing was other people had come the same way I had. That was the summer of the harmonic convergence of 1987. Have you heard of that?"

"Yes," the interviewer said. "They had all been called."

"Yes," I said, studying my interviewer's clothes—jeans and a woolen blazer, dangly earrings. She might understand the convergence.

"The more I talked to people, the more I realized that other people had come from all over the world to this place. But the really strange thing was," I said, "was that the school was housed in an old Nazi headquarters."

"Oh, no," she said.

"What, don't you agree with the choice? Do you think it's wrong to put a Peace Research Institute on the site of an old Nazi base?"

"No, I don't think it's wrong," she said. "I think it's horrifyingly right."

"The place had the eeriness of that time. It was beautiful, ordered and solid with a fountain in front and a pretty yard with benches to sit on to enjoy the streams of water as they fell from the center to the edge."

"The night after I had contracted body lice, I had to go to a Norwegian clinic and get a prescription for Norwegian Kwell and a little comb. We had to wake up my roommate and tell her to gather up all her clothes; they had to be sterilized."

"Then it got around that I had body lice and people began to think I was a prostitute because I talked to so many different people—but only to hear their stories, and then I began to feel like one because I had come there only to learn how to write a story—to understand

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conflict on the page, and suddenly I was embroiled in a real-life, international conflict, the one between me and my actions. I was out of control."

"The night I thought I was having a heart attack I ran downstairs out of fear and into the quiet courtyard, my bare feet wet because of the cold, summer grass. I was a disgrace, the young, small American girl who wanted to be a writer, but who was nothing but a fool, 'who would never understand great tragedy and how the world worked because she lived in the US, where frivolous people paid good money to go to places where they never talked for two months.' "

"The South African had said, 'only in the US could a person be that selfish—complete insulation, no words, no action.' 'Oh, Comrade,' he had said, after I had told him of a relaxation center in my country I had heard of."

"I did not know what to do, so I went into the main building of the school, where they had housed prisoners in the basement, to be met at the door by the doorman, a man who was kind and who had been watching me and how I operated."

" 'I've come to Norway to study and now I am dying. Do you have any aspirin?' I had asked."

"He'd said, 'What's wrong?' and given me two tablets, running the water in his office sink until it was cold."

" 'I can't sleep.' "

" 'Insomnia. I am an chronic insomniac. That's why I work here. Can't sleep at night. I've worked here for twenty-three years.' "

"He talked to me, asked me if I had ever had trouble sleeping. 'Never,' I had said. And then I left him to go back to my room to try to sleep. I didn't sleep all night, and finally it was morning, and I was alive."

"How do you think this experience has changed you?" asked the interviewer.

"It's made me more tolerant of people's differences," I said. But I didn't tell her that the experience had affected every aspect of my life. That I would never be the

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same, and I would never forget the people I had met. That I hadn't learned how to write a story, but that I had learned how to have a heart attack.

The interviewer, to say the least, was taken aback. "Do you have any questions you'd like to ask us?" she said, and I launched into queries about insurance and course loads.

Two weeks later, I sat at my desk, giving conferences at the small, state school in Ohio, knowing that I probably wouldn't take the job in Maryland if I had to because I'd have to take a pay cut, but glad that I had an outlet. I was listening to student after student—twenty a day—tell me about the research papers they intended to write while my office mate, who was a drama professor, took reservations over the phone for a children's theater production she was mounting in two days.

"I'm going to write about nuclear power," one student said.

"What about nuclear power?" They were all the same—youngsters with big ideas, and no focus, no sense of voice, of what they really needed to know. And I was trying to teach them. I was only a few years older than they were. I still didn't know how to write a story.

"I think the topic might be too big. How do you plan to research this?"

My office mate, an actress who'd converted to director because she knew something about acting techniques in the real world and on the stage, switched from taking phone reservations to sewing costumes.

I grew increasingly more nervous the more students I saw. It was like reliving Norway all over again—all those stories, all the problems of the world passing before me, and I was supposed to do something about them—this time help students organize them into something meaningful. I was supposed to have the answers. I saw ten students straight, for twenty minutes each, with no breaks in-between. My vision began to blur. I was taking

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it all in. I was in charge of everything: the starving, nuclear power, asbestos removal, trends in love, the development of a horse, hurricanes in Jamaica, mailmen's rights, oil spills, psychopaths vs. sociopaths, tenants' rights in South Africa.

I needed to go to lunch. Wanting to get out of town, I drove to a small diner in Cambridge, a place I went on Sundays for eggs, toast, home fries and coffee—all for $1.79. I ordered my usual, glimpsing myself in the mirror behind the counter. It was an old fountain counter and there was Phil behind the glass shelf that housed pickled items—eggs, cukes, peppers, all in green vinegar—flipping burgers, being the short-order cook/restaurant owner that he was.

"Hello," he said, recognizing me. I liked him, admired the way he ran his restaurant, how he stocked the place with a large dictionary for the diners to look up words, how he hired senior citizens to waitress for him, how he seemed to have been around the block. This man had lived, could certainly tell a story, and he had the eyes to prove it. I liked the way he smiled at me. He scraped the stove and began to prepare my eggs. As he cooked them, I alternated from looking at my frazzled face in the mirror to watching the elderly waitress do dishes in a sink in front of me. I swiveled on my chair. At times, I could see Phil glance at me in the mirror, while he cooked. Phil was sexy, although he was twenty years older than I. And then I saw him in a moment when he didn't know I was looking. He opened up a jar of grape jelly and spooned a spoonful on my plate. That's how they served the jelly, not in packets, but on the plate, and I wished that I hadn't seen that—their system for doing things—how he had done that time and time again to make it nice for me even though I always left the jelly on the plate. Before the jelly had been something I could ignore, now it had meaning because I had seen the man who had offered it to me, not knowing if I would like it or eat it, but who graciously dumped it on me. I knew I didn't want it, knew I would leave it there on the plate, that blob of jelly.

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That afternoon I dealt with bomber developments since World War II, basketball stars who sold tennis shoes, the Baltic states, witchcraft, the development of zoos, a no-show and the miracle properties of hemp, and I did it all well, perfectly, knowing every answer and everything.

The next day I dragged in. My office mate, Jean, was busy preparing for an opening night. Having watched me all week, she knew how I operated and asked me point blank, "Do you meditate?"

"No," I said.

"I do it all—breathing, meditation, visualization."

For some reason she had to tell me a story, and only now do I know that it was an attempt to help make me see something I was missing.

"One of my actors looked so self-conscious on the stage, and I knew he had potential. I had seen glimmers of it in auditions, and I had given him the part because I knew he could do it. The kid had everything, but he lacked one tool. No one had told him what subtext was, so I told him to pretend he was the character when he wasn't saying the lines."

Now I know that she was trying to tell me to pretend I was myself when I wasn't saying my lines. She wanted me to stay in character, to have a focus, a sense of who I was trying to be, of who I thought I was.

I must have somehow known that the story was meant to help me because I told her of how once when I was a ballet dancer as a child ". . . I had been told to concentrate on one point in space because I could never execute the combinations and maintain any sort of balance. I always fell off pointe or spun myself out of a turn because I constantly looked around, never focusing my eyes on one spot. I watched the parents who had come to see their daughters dance, how they knitted or crocheted or sat on the edge of their chairs. How Tammy's stomach popped out when she stopped dancing. How Bonnie's acne never seemed to get any better, how the pipes were sprayed with bumpy insulation, how the teacher smoked

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cigarettes and carried a large stick. 'Laurie, stop looking around,' this teacher had said. 'Keep your eyes in one place. Focus.' And then, miraculously, I could dance, doing each combination perfectly, my eyes fixed on a small crack between the two mirrors, where someone had nailed a nail. 'That's terrific. If you keep this up, I can use you,' she had said. In order to dance well, I had to give up the world, had to limit my gaze to a nail driven into the wall, had to hold onto the nail with my eyes and allow my body to perform. It was all about breathing and concentration. It was about being there inside of me, not out in the air with the language and glances, odors and sounds," I told Jean.

I remembered how tired I had been all week of the sound of voices because I had lived all of them. I had given all the solutions, all the ways to organize the material, to find the thesis, to focus the essay. The answer was to limit the vision.

"I guess that's what teaching is," I said, "spotting exactly what a student needs and delivering it to him."

"Yes," she said and continued sewing the costume she was making.

The next day, things went smoother. I had my focus. I listened to the problems, allowing the words to play in front of me, pulled in from the drama, like a person who stands under an awning in a rainstorm, alive in my body, enjoying its protective covering, directing my eyes to meaningless things—the tape on my desk, a book—to collect my thoughts. These seconds were not that serious. I did not need to follow each one, to react to every move, gesture, tone. These seconds were mine.

Jean watched me, astonished at my control. I know somehow that she wondered if she had helped me with her little anecdote. And then it slipped. I was not planning on telling her that she *had* helped me, did not want to tell her, but I did, as that man at the restaurant behind the counter had spooned the jelly on the plate, out of necessity.

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"What you need is a focus," I told Mike McFadden, only this time I meant it, and it bounced off the walls—my voice. "Don't talk about all aspects of 'Drugs in Sports,' like an encyclopedia entry. Pick one aspect—like 'Reasons Athletes Might Do Drugs in Sports,' the problems, the pressures. Your paper might be 'The Three Main Reasons Athletes Take Drugs,' or it might be 'The Best Rehabilitation Program in the Country,' but it's got to have a focus." He smiled. He understood what focus meant. "Don't try to work in the whole universe," I said. "Pick one aspect and stick to it." He said, "Okay," telling me that he was changing his major from business to history because business was too boring. He said he had discussed it with his parents, and they thought it was a good idea. With the tool he needed, he left the office, capable of making a C.

Jean did a good job of not letting on that she knew she had helped me. Even though I had tried to keep it down, had tried to suppress it, I had given a good tip, not out of a desire for self-gain or to aid the needy, but simply out of the desire to express the truth, as clear and transparent as grape jelly—a condiment.

Even though I may not have eaten the jelly, Phil had given it to me because it was the right thing to do. I so wish now I had taken a tiny taste of grape, and I vowed from that day on to eat at least one of the four slices with a dash of purple because that would keep me clean and whole and happy with what I was dealt in life—the ability and the grace to focus, to stand up for myself, to live behind my eyes as well as in the world. And never to forget where I had come from and how to say where I had been.

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HALCY

My excellent Duke.

WAYNE

After you.

HALCY

After you.

WAYNE AND HALCY SMILE AT EACH OTHER AND BOW.
PHILIP AND PENNY HAPPILY FOLLOW THEM AND THEIR CHILDREN OFF.

MESSENGER #1 (SINGS)

You must always stop at a cafe by the sea
You must bask in the sun by this lunatic, crazily blue sea.
You must watch your kids play
The eternal game of Ringalevio!!!!
See them running in and out of the water
See them throwing an orange frisbee
ALl the while you drink Bellinis!
What are Bellinis?
Champagne and fresh white peaches!

PENNY AND PHILIP RETURN, ARM IN ARM, PEACEFUL. THEY WATCH THEIR CHILDREN IN THE DISTANCE AND DRINK BELLINIS.

PHILIP

Can't tell who's yours.

PENNY

Can't tell who's mine.

WAYNE AND HALCY APPEAR. THE HARPISCHORD PLAYS TREMOLO.

PENNY

I heard the murmuring first. It wasn't a babble like babbling brook. But it had the quality of clear water running over glittery stones.

PHILIP

Can't tell who's yours. Can't tell who's mine - it's all going to be fine -- but then I heard it too - I heard- what? -the sound of exotic birds clawing the earth--

WAYNE

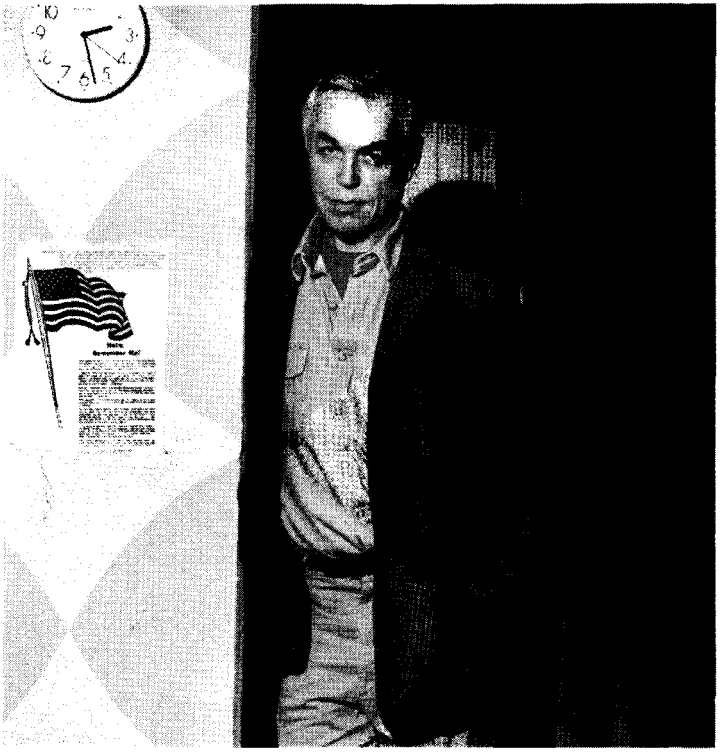
---to marry an Etruscan.

HALCY

Mel is a wonderful man. Just does not possess one drop of Etruscan blood. I love him. Our kids. The most wonderful kids. I'm happy.

A manuscript page from Four Baboons Adoring the Sun *by John Guare.*

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John Guare

The Art of Theater IX

John Guare's career in the theater began at New York's legendary Caffé Cino in the 1960s, during the birth of off-off Broadway theater, the experimental movement that has developed into contemporary American drama. In 1965, Guare was among the original members of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut. The innovative summer playwrights' festival that began there has come to define the way American theaters develop new plays. In 1968 Guare received the Obie for his play Muzeeka, *which was originally produced at the 1967 O'Neill festival. By the early seventies, Guare's*

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work was playing off Broadway with House of Blue Leaves *(which won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play) and playing on Broadway with* Two Gentlemen of Verona, *for which he co-adapted the book with Mel Shapiro and Galt MacDermot and wrote the lyrics. It too won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as well the 1972 Tony Award for Best Musical. During this period Guare also collaborated with Milos Forman on the screenplay of the Czech director's first American film,* Taking Off, *which received the Jury Prize at the Cannes Festival.*

As playwright in residence at the New York Shakespeare Festival, Guare wrote Landscape of the Body, Rich and Famous *and* Marco Polo Sings a Solo. Bosom and Neglect *premiered at Chicago's Goodman Theater and played on Broadway, at the Stratford Festival in Canada and at the Yale Repertory Theater. The Manhattan Theater Club produced* Gardenia, *directed by Karel Reisz, and the BBC broadcast* Women and Water. *His screenplay for Louis Malle's* Atlantic City *received an Oscar nomination and won the New York, Los Angeles and National Film Critics Circle Awards and the Golden Bear at the Venice Film Festival. Lincoln Center Theater revived* House of Blue Leaves *triumphantly in 1986 and then produced* Six Degrees of Separation, *which won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play of 1991.* Six Degrees *also received wide critical acclaim for its London production which opened at the Royal Court in June 1992, with Stockard Channing repeating her starring role. The Los Angeles, Sydney, Johannesburg and Istanbul productions opened to brilliant reviews in the space of two weeks in October, 1992. Guare has taught at Yale, New York University and Harvard. In 1981 he received the Award of Merit from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, which in 1989 elected him a member.*

Guare, who was born in New York City in 1938, has lived for many years in Greenwich Village with his wife Adele Chatfield-Taylor, an historic preservationist who is president of the American Academy in Rome. Their rambling apartment is comfortably worn and packed to the ceiling with books and photographs. A nineteenth-century church steeple stands in view out-

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side the window. At the time of the interview Guare's new play, Four Baboons Adoring the Sun, *had recently opened at Lincoln Center. He had just completed a screenplay based on the life of George Gershwin, which is to be filmed by Martin Scorcese. Mary Pat Walsh, his assistant, gave advice to house guests who came in and out. The phone rang and rang. Dogs barked. Even when the interview continued at Lincoln Center, the feeling of life beating at Guare's door persisted—as did the sense that he enjoys, or perhaps relies on, the clamor.*

INTERVIEWER

Why do I always feel there's something blasphemous about your work?

JOHN GUARE

I don't know why you feel that way. Are you all right?

INTERVIEWER

There's something dangerous about your work. A Jacobean undercurrent.

GUARE

Hold on!

INTERVIEWER

All right, let's start with this then: you once told me that you thought of playwrighting as simply another job in the theater.

GUARE

To stay around any place you love, you have to have a job. In college at Georgetown in the fifties, I got my first theater job checking coats at the National, which was Washington's main theater. I sold orange drinks there at intermission and felt personally responsible for the entire audience's receptivity to what was going on onstage. I

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ushered at the Shubert in New Haven during graduate school when plays en route to Broadway still went out of town to try out. I worked backstage at summer stock doing jobs from garbage man, to strapping on Herbert Marshall's wooden leg, to fixing Gloria Swanson's broken plumbing in her dressing room with her yelling at me as I worked the plunger. I ran the light board for her show, which involved bringing up all the stage lights surreptitiously when she came onstage so the audience would subliminally think, gee, isn't everything brighter when she's around? I was supposed to do it very quietly. It was an old light board and very squeaky. I'd bring the lights up one point—and it squeaked. I don't know what the audience felt when they heard that sound—when she came on and left the stage. It was called a "star bump." Knowing lore like that made me feel there was a secret freemasonry to the theater. Then I toured as an advance man for a summer stock package, setting up the show each week in a different theater before moving on to the next. Even with *Six Degrees of Separation* I felt part of my job as playwright was to go backstage two or three times every week during the run to check the backstage temperature—who's unhappy, who's not speaking, whose costumes are wearing out. You must keep people happy backstage because that affects what's onstage. During a run, the playwright feels like the mayor of a small town filled with noble creatures who have to get out there and make it brand new every night. When a production works, it's unlike any other joy in the world.

INTERVIEWER

So you chose the theater life early on.

GUARE

My parents started taking me to plays early. Plays have a celebratory nature that no other form has. Theater always meant celebration, a birthday, a reward for good grades. I felt at home in a theater. I loved being part of an audience. All the rules: the audience has to

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see the play on a certain date at a certain time in a certain place in a certain seat. You watched the stage in unison with strangers. The theater had intermissions where you could smoke cigarettes in the lobby and imagine you were interesting. The theater made everybody in the audience behave better, as if they were all in on the same secret. I found it amazing that what was up on that stage could make these people who didn't know each other laugh, respond, gasp in exactly the same way at the same time.

INTERVIEWER

What was the first play you saw?

GUARE

Annie Get Your Gun. Ethel Merman.

INTERVIEWER

I have a theory that there are two kinds of people in the theater . . . those who started out because they went to see *Annie Get Your Gun* or those who went into it because they read Antonin Artaud.

GUARE

I was reading Artaud during *Annie Get Your Gun.* A girl, Jane, in our grammar school class was actually in *Annie Get Your Gun,* and she'd be off Wednesdays for matinees. On holidays, Sister Donalda, the very stern superior, would come to our class and ask Jane to come forward and sing Sister's favorite song; Jane would step to the front of the class and belt out "You Can't Get a Man with a Gun."

INTERVIEWER

So you've always been stagestruck?

GUARE

In the blood. My mother's family was in show business. Her two uncles toured in vaudeville with a bill of

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sixteen plays they cobbled together from 1880 to 1917 with titles like *Pawn Ticket 210, The Old Toll House* and *Girl of the Garrison.* Lines like the old man coming forward and saying, "Twenty five years ago this very night my son left home taking the money he did not know was rightfully his. Oh, if I could only see him again." *(flickering outside the window)* "Oh, the same lightning! The same thunder!" *(knock knock)* "Who can that be!"

My grandfather was a cop in Lynn, Massachusetts. In a raid on a Lynn cathouse they found a very small child left by one of the arrested girls. He brought the baby home; he turned out to be five years old and a midget. Little Billy was taken into the act by the uncles for the good reason that he was a great little hoofer and song shouter. The act broke up when little Billy left to join the George M. Cohan Review of 1918; dressed as a tiny soldier, he was one of the cast who introduced *Over There.* My mother's real brother, who was known in our family as Big Bill, became an agent for stars like W.C. Fields, Al Jolson and Will Rogers. Big Bill was called "Square Deal" Grady by Damon Runyon for the "creative" contracts he made with his clients. He was head of casting at MGM from 1934 to 1956. I never saw Big Bill much but his presence and power to discover people figured heavily in my dream life. In fact, the monologue that opens the second act of *House of Blue Leaves* happened exactly as described: Big Bill was on a major MGM talent hunt searching for an unknown child to play Huckleberry Finn. To escape all these kids, he came to see us. I decided fate had sent him to me: *I* would be Huck. I packed my bags and went mad and auditioned. He quickly left thinking he'd been set up by my parents. My mother cried. It was horrible. I gave up all dreams of acting at age eight. Playwrighting seemed a lot safer.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever want to write anything else? A novel?

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GUARE

In college I was editor of the literary magazine and wrote sensitive short stories overly inspired by Flaubert. Our English teacher actually knew Katherine Anne Porter; he showed her a short story I had written. She told him she would pay $1500 for the first sentence: "After Pinky vomited, Ingrid Aldamine sat up in bed." She liked the rhythm. She didn't mention anything about the rest. However, if I could write one sentence that an actual famous writer would comment on—wow! Those few crumbs were enough for me. But no more stories. I felt I was betraying a higher calling by writing mere short stories or novels. I believed plays to be on a higher and rarer plane. I still do. Novelists were only a couple of hundred years old. Playwrights were thousands of years old. If I was going to be a writer, it had to be plays.

INTERVIEWER

When did you actually discover this?

GUARE

In 1949, I was eleven. My pal, Bobby, and I read a story in *Life* magazine about two boys spending their summer vacation making a movie of Tom Sawyer. We had no camera but Bobby had a garage. I immediately wrote three plays. Between shanghaiing kids on the block and rounding up puppets, we got together a cast. We then called *Life* magazine to alert them to this great story. "Time/Life," the operator said. "We have this great story of two boys spending their summer vacation . . . " "Time/Life, to whom do you wish to speak?" "No, you see, these two boys . . . " Click!

INTERVIEWER

The operator obviously didn't have a good nose for a story.

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GUARE

We lowered our sights and called the local Long Island paper. "Two boys are putting on plays and—wait! We're giving all the proceeds to the orphans of Long Beach!" "Oh yeah?" they said. On the last day of our performances, a big black car pulled up to Bobby's garage. A photographer took our pictures; they published a story about an eleven-year-old playwright. For my twelfth birthday, my parents gave me a portable typewriter because I was a playwright; I still use it.

INTERVIEWER

What happened to the orphans of Long Beach?

GUARE

Oh, they were all given lifetime passes to the beach.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of yourself as a regional writer?

GUARE

Yes. From the region of New York.

INTERVIEWER

Have you always lived in the city?

GUARE

Yes and no. In 1950, when I was twelve, my father suffered an angina. He had to take at least a year off from work so he, my mother and I lived most of the time in Ellenville, in upstate New York, with his elderly aunt who was also quite sick, mentally and physically. It was the McCarthy time. Since the grammar school in Ellenville neither pledged allegiance to the flag nor said the Our Father, the nuns in Jackson Heights in New York City agreed with my parents that it would be better for me not to go to school at *all* rather than enroll in an obvious commie den. So I stayed enrolled at St. Joan of

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Arc in Jackson Heights, but I had all this time by myself in Ellenville. Television had not yet come to Ellenville, which was in the low part of a valley. All I did was read. And read. And I wrote. And I walked and walked, lived in my own world, my soul protected from the red menace. I'm the only person I know who benefited from the McCarthy period. In 1950 a play I read about, again in *Life* magazine (obviously my link to the world), opened on Broadway. It was called *The Wisteria Trees.* Joshua Logan had taken *The Cherry Orchard* and set it down south. What a good idea! It made me read *The Cherry Orchard.* What a great play! I knew about Tennessee Williams, again from a story in *Life.* I even saw the movie of *A Streetcar Named Desire* up there in Ellenville at the Shadowland Theater. I started reading Chekhov's plays and loved *Three Sisters.* I remembered what Joshua Logan had done with *The Wisteria Trees.* Hmmm. I typed out the first act of my play on my new official playwright's typewriter—everytime those girls moaned for "Moscow," I typed in "New Orleans," hearing the aching, yearning voice of Kim Stanley, whom I knew from television in New York. That was playwrighting. Neurotic, misunderstood southerners trying to get to New Orleans.

INTERVIEWER

It must have been a good lesson, copying out *Three Sisters.*

GUARE

It taught me about typing. I learned more about basic play structure poring over the original cast albums of shows . . . the brainstorm that the second song was usually the "want" song. And how in *Guys and Dolls* the need for a spot for the oldest established permanent floating crap game in New York was technically no different than those three sisters yearning to get to Moscow. The *need* made the story. Creating the arc and completing it.

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INTERVIEWER

How long did that period of off-and-on hooky last?

GUARE

Until I went to Catholic high school in Brooklyn. I took a long subway ride each day to Williamsburg, which was simultaneously an old Hasidic and a brand new Latino community. I learned how to conjugate Latin verbs and do Euclidean geometry standing up in a packed morning rush hour. The training of doing homework in a crowded subway is good preparation for working in the theater where rehearsal is the place you do your rewriting—nightmarishly public, even if it's just the cast and crew. I also went to more and more plays. The best thing I ever saw was Tyrone Guthrie's production of *Tamburlaine the Great.* I still haven't seen anything like Anthony Quayle striding over a map of the world. A body hoisted to the top of the Winter Garden stage and down below a phalanx of archers shooting arrows into it. Marlowe was better than anybody.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote plays in college.

GUARE

A play a year. The songs in *House of Blue Leaves* written by the failed songwriter were my successes in a college musical in 1960 that started out as a musical of *The Great Gatsby* but ended up as a version of *Singin' in the Rain*, called *The Thirties Girl.*

INTERVIEWER

You went to the Yale School of Drama . . .

GUARE

. . . where I read every play in the library and talked about plays and wrote plays, ushered at the Shubert and learned how plays were rewritten and re-rehearsed; then

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I'd see them in New York and see how sometimes the rewriting had harmed them.

INTERVIEWER

You studied playwrighting. You've taught it. What can you learn from those classes?

GUARE

In a good playwrighting course you learn which playwright you write like. And why you admire that writer.

INTERVIEWER

Do all writers become peers?

GUARE

Yes. If you can't be arrogant in drama school, where can you be? You learn to approach, say, Chekhov as a peer. How does he deal with entrances and exits? You study how Chekhov gets somebody offstage: you see how he takes a simple exit in *Uncle Vanya*, in which Sonya leaves to ask permission to play the piano and builds to Sonya's sudden return—"He says no."—a heart-stopping moment that sums up a life.

INTERVIEWER

And after Chekhov?

GUARE

Irish writers. F. Scott Fitzgerald. I was bowled over by the fact that Lady Gregory's first play was *Colman and Guaire.* It was a sign.

INTERVIEWER

Why Irish?

GUARE

Because I'm Irish. One hundred percent on both sides.

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INTERVIEWER

There's a line in *House of Blue Leaves* where one character says to Bananas, "What else was I going to name a little Italian girl?" I always assumed you were Italian.

GUARE

That was my attempt to disguise the real stuff in the play.

INTERVIEWER

Parenthesis. Once and for all. How do you pronounce your name? I've heard it Gor. Gar.

GUARE

Grrr. In Ireland it's pronounced somewhere between Gworra and Gorra, but when they came to Vermont, they flattened it out into a sound that rhymes with bare, blare, care, dare, fare, glare, hare, mare, etc., etc. I was once answering questions after a talk, and a woman asked, "Mr. Gwa-ray, would you talk about the meaning . . . " I interrupted her. "Excuse me, but it's pronounced Guare." She said, very grand, "I pronounce it Gwa-ray."

INTERVIEWER

Back to the Irish.

GUARE

I saw a college production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at every performance, and so I wrote a play in emulation of Wilde. I wrote an additional act to *Plough and the Stars* because O'Casey didn't go far enough. Shaw—*Heartbreak House* is the best. Williams's *Orpheus Descending* opened in Washington my freshman year, and I went to the first performance. A latecomer fell noisily down the steep balcony stairs during the first act; I yelled out, "It's Orpheus descending!" and everybody laughed. Oh, if only I could be European or Southern and not cursed with the nothingness of my surroundings!

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INTERVIEWER

O'Neill?

GUARE

O'Neill won a Nobel so he was like a European. It's hard to learn from somebody like O'Neill. He's great in spite of his flaws. His genius has nothing to teach others except to keep writing all your life, and maybe at the end you'll write a few masterpieces.

INTERVIEWER

Shakespeare?

GUARE

We can only learn one lesson from Shakespeare and that's that there are no stage directions. It never says "JULIET *(in a melancholy yet noble, quixotic way).*" The emotions and the intentions must be firmly embedded right in the lines.

INTERVIEWER

And the more moderns?

GUARE

I was very taken with Auden and Isherwood's *Ascent of F6* because it took place scaling a mountain. I only knew plays in living rooms. I hated our living room. Through reading F. Scott Fitzgerald and reading about him, I learned about his friend on the Riviera, Philip Barry, also an Irish-American. I liked the destructive lives they led and the glamorous wish-fulfillment worlds of *Holiday* and *The Philadelphia Story.* I wished I lived in their living rooms with no financial necessities. I liked the rhythm and artificiality of high comedy. And I liked Barry's plays for their mood changes. They could suddenly go pensive. For learning purposes, they seemed more manageable than O'Neill.

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INTERVIEWER

More manageable?

GUARE

Barry wrote not only boulevard plays like *Holiday* or *Paris Bound*, but far more instructive, nobly failed experiments like *Hotel Universe* or *Here Come the Clowns.* I did a thesis on him and learned about the nineteenth-century form *comedie larmoyante*, "tearful comedy" . . . noble and brave and smiling through the tears and flattering the audience. Take the closing lines of *The Philadelphia Story*: "You look like a goddess." "Yes, but I feel like a human being." And how *comedie larmoyante* grew into the well-made plays of Sardou and Scribe and then how that was turned on its ear by Ibsen whose plays did everything *not* to make you comfortable.

INTERVIEWER

What else did you learn?

GUARE

Moss Hart said the audience will give you all their attention in the play's first fifteen minutes; but in the sixteenth minute they will decide whether to go on the journey you want them to take. That first fifteen minutes draws up the contract of your agreement with the audience. You can subvert it or play with it, but you must set up the premises for the evening, whether the play is *Mother Courage* or *Getting Gertie's Garter*—well, maybe not *Getting Gertie's Garter.* I once gave a course at Yale on only the first fifteen minutes of a play. *The Homecoming. The Cherry Orchard. What the Butler Saw.* The information the audience receives in that opening movement, that musical statement, allows us to enter the world of that play.

INTERVIEWER

How important are other aspects of the stage to a playwright?

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GUARE

While I was a student at Yale in 1962, I took courses in set design, lighting and costume from Donald Oenslager and Ernest Bevan. I needed to learn the light in which a play must live. I wasn't any good at the technical bits, but that wasn't the point. I learned the work processes and the range of possibilities of the design people with whom the playwright shares the stage. They provide the visual entry into the playwright's world. The playwright is the person responsible for everything on that stage. If the play doesn't work because of a miscast actor or because of a bad set, or it's misdirected, it's the play that will take the brunt. *Anything* that happens on that stage is playwrighting. So the playwright better know the actors available, the directors, the designers, all of whom deal with the life being created on stage. I once saw a comedy in rehearsal, funny and knockdown, but not until it got onstage did we all realize that the costumes, which had looked so witty on paper, had been constructed in a very heavy fabric that disguised and covered the actors' bodies and de-physicalized them. It was too late and too expensive to change anything. The costumes went on. They got raves. The play was a bust. So the playwright has to look at paintings, listen to music, to say, yes that's the effect I want my plays to have.

INTERVIEWER

Craft.

GUARE

Yes. I love the part of playwrighting that is a craft to be learned continually, the *-wright* part, like *shipwright* or *wheelwright* or *cartwright.* Whether Aeschylus or George S. Kaufman, a playwright is a writer who understands the technical aspects of knowing how to deliver exposition, how to get a character on and offstage, where to place the intermission, how to bring down a curtain. How to have all the characters' stories end up simultaneously. That's

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craft, and craft can be taught by emulation. You figure out how your playwright of the moment accomplishes those facts of the theater. You learn to study those playwrights technically, the way a musician does a score, breaking the work down to learn how its composer achieved certain effects. And then, having learned a technique, one can use it oneself.

INTERVIEWER

Strindberg says somewhere the final effect is all.

GUARE

Yes. Learning how to drive your work to that uncluttered final point is a craft. You learn there's no such thing as a perfect play unless it's *Life Is a Dream* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca.

INTERVIEWER

What other plays?

GUARE

When I was a kid, I saw a play that had a profound effect on me—*Time Remembered* by Jean Anouilh, with Richard Burton, Susan Strasberg and Helen Hayes, of all people. It was a straight play that had a pit orchestra—a literal melodrama for which Vernon Duke wrote a wonderful score; it created such an air of magic. I saw it out of town, and I remember Helen Hayes being great. I went every night. Then it came to New York and sort of flattened out. It didn't get very good reviews; I went to see it. Dull, very dull. There was something missing from it. I later read an interview with Helen Hayes that said when she was in Washington, she'd never been more scared in her life. She didn't understand one thing she was doing onstage. She didn't understand the play. She was in a panic every night. Then in Boston, dreading going on, she was waiting in her dressing room when she heard a harpsichord being played on the radio that

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soothed her, and she said, "Oh, that's what my character is, I'm a harpsichord." So, I said to myself, oh, *that's* the trouble, she became a harpsichord. I learned that it's better to create panic on the stage because panic is alive. That was a great revelation to me, that experience with *Time Remembered.*

Durrenmatt's *The Visit* also had a profound effect on me. To have a play draw you in with humor and then make you crazy and send you out mixed-up! When I got to Feydeau, Strindberg, Pinter, Joe Orton and the "dis-ease" they created, I was home. Pinter's plays had the rhythm of high comedy trapped in the wrong surroundings; I identified with that. I loved the strictures of farce, besides liking the sound of an audience laughing. I loved Feydeau's one rule of playwrighting: Character A: My life is perfect as long as I don't see Character B. Knock knock. Enter Character B. And Feydeau's hysteria opened the door to Strindberg.

I always liked plays to be funny and early on stumbled upon the truth that farce is tragedy speeded up. Filling up that hunger. Get to Moscow. Get into an adult world. The want becomes a need. The need becomes a hunger and because you're speeding it up so much . . .

INTERVIEWER

. . . it becomes ridiculous.

GUARE

Exactly. The intensity puts it on the edge. The top keeps spinning faster until it can only explode, and if you've got a stageful of people at that psychic, manic state and an audience in tune with them, then something dangerous might happen out of that hysteria. You want to move the audience into a new part of themselves.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of Irish, what about Beckett?

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GUARE

Beckett's a great writer but a bad influence. Young writers used to think that tramps speaking non sequiturs was playwrighting. As a teacher, you want to stop people from writing pastiches of Beckett and thinking that's playwrighting. You want them to learn how to admire him, but to know the aim of playwrighting is not to become a ventriloquist in someone else's voice.

INTERVIEWER

What about your voice?

GUARE

You have to keep working to find your voice, then have the grace or good sense to recognize it as your voice and then learn how to use it.

INTERVIEWER

How is being a playwright different from being a novelist?

GUARE

A playwright is a writer who only has ninety-nine pieces of paper to tell his tale. You've got to get your story told in approximately two hours. If it's too long you have to learn how to cut without destroying the intention of your work. People think playwrighting is just somebody supplying the words. No. Theater is the place where you learn all your lessons in a crowd. Imagine a novelist watching five hundred people simultaneously reading a draft of a novel and then making adjustments based on their immediate responses. Also, you had better know the audience with whom you want to draw up the contract. Peter Brook gave a seminar at La Mama and someone asked him what the prime aesthetic problem was in the theater. He said, "Oh, that's easy. When once you've discovered the laugh, it's how do you keep the laugh."

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INTERVIEWER

You've had the most traditional route to becoming a playwright. You didn't run off to sea . . .

GUARE

No. I went to California after I graduated in 1963. That last year at Yale I wrote a play called *Did You Write My Name in the Snow?* which was seen by people from MCA. I got the offer of a job as a writing trainee at Universal Studios. My uncle finally spoke to me again, the first time since the *Huckleberry Finn* fiasco. Impressed that I had a master's from Yale and that Universal was interested in me, he got me a job—as a trainee at MGM. Wow! Which job to take! Luckily, I got my draft notice and spent six months in the Air Force. During that time an aunt in San Francisco asked me to come see her. She was very disappointed in me. What was this about going to work in the movies? What happened to my dreams of being a playwright? I said I had to make a living; eventually I would get back to writing plays. She said I knew nothing about life and I'd get swallowed up. She had planned to leave me ten thousand dollars. Now, she would give the sum to me if I left California, went back to New York, wrote plays, went to Europe, sent her postcards. If I didn't do this, she would leave the money to a dog charity. So I headed back to New York, lived in a rented room in Brooklyn. Off Broadway was beginning—our version of Paris in the twenties. I saw remarkable plays at the Caffé Cino by Lanford Wilson and H.M. Katoukas, who walked around the Village with a parakeet tied to each finger of his hands. Ten parakeets flying all around him. The Caffé was run by a burly Sicilian, Joe Cino, who worked in a steam laundry from 7:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., then went to his kingdom, his paradise, a café on Cornelia Street decorated with a crush of twinkling Christmas tree lights, religious statues, Kewpie dolls and blowups of Jean Harlow and Maria Callas, a kind of insane storefront attic. I brought two plays to Cino. He

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said, sorry we're only doing plays by Aquarians. I sputtered that I *was* an Aquarius! He looked at my driver's license. February 5. He weighed my plays in his beefy hands, then checked his astrological charts. "You go into rehearsal in two weeks, run for two weeks with a possibility of an extension for a third." I don't know what would have happened to me if I had been a Gemini.

INTERVIEWER

It makes about as much sense as most producers' philosophies.

GUARE

My father came to the Cino to see my play. He was shocked that we passed the hat for money afterwards. A Yale graduate and here I was passing the hat on Cornelia Street! He had an idea. Write a hit *musical*, then come back to the Cino when you won't have to pass the hat. I told him to get lost. Yet another stupid idea. At about that same time, Edward Albee earned himself eternal playwright sainthood. Out of the profits from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* he and his producers took a lease on a theater on Van Dam Street, and every week for six months of the year from 1963 to 1969 they produced a new play. The plays were not reviewed. Audiences just showed up at the theater to see what was there. They were very exciting times. I once wrote a play called *A Day for Surprises* on a Thursday, and it opened the next Monday.

INTERVIEWER

When did the O'Neill Theatre Center come into play?

GUARE

The O'Neill changed everything for me. In 1965, questionnaires were sent around to various theaters and agents to name promising playwrights, and they picked twenty names, mine among them. They brought us up to

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Waterford, Connecticut to ask us what playwrights wanted. Well, their plays performed of course, to meet other actors, a theater community, a place to learn what designers do and meet directors . . . give ourselves more tools to work with. That first group included Lanford Wilson, Sam Shepard and Leonard Melfi. After a long weekend they returned us to New York and dropped us off in Times Square. We all felt we'd never hear from them again, that it was just an artsy version of the Fresh Air Fund. So I forgot about it. I went on living very frugally on my aunt's legacy for four years. I went to Europe, got a job in London, which was then a miracle of great acting and theater: Olivier's *Othello*, Pinter's *Homecoming.* Then I hitched from Paris to Egypt.

INTERVIEWER

Your aunt, did you send her postcards?

GUARE

I had made a bargain. Sure did.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write on that trip?

GUARE

I got to Cairo at the end of 1965. My parents sent me news clippings of the day the Pope came to New York. Their long letter told me that while I might be seeing the world I didn't know *what* I had missed by not being in New York that magical day—a Pope voluntarily leaving Rome for the first time ever to fly across an ocean to plead for peace, and I could miss *that!* Sitting in Cairo, reading what that day meant to them back on Queens Boulevard, I saw my life and all our dreams and where those dreams had taken us, and I realized I had a subject. I started writing *House of Blue Leaves.* I read that letter, and everything that had happened to me in my life became accessible. I heard the sound of my life. I was no

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longer a secret Southern writer. I heard New York for the first time.

INTERVIEWER

By then the O'Neill Theatre Center was in operation.

GUARE

The center was having its first official summer in Waterford, in 1966. In those days they would choose a playwright and assign him or her a date to read a play. I had the first act of *House of Blue Leaves*, and I played the lead—well, read it. I liked the people who were up there—Bobby Lewis, Alan Schneider, Jose Quintero, Lloyd Richards. I liked the sense of community and festivity. It was all very receptive and intelligent and hip. I found an audience it was great fun to write for. I had a *place* to write for. I learned about keeping at the business of doing new work in front of audiences, working with actors, learning the way *they* work, finding the kind of actors who understand the rhythms of your work. That's all a theater company is really: a group of talented people who laugh at the same jokes. You have to learn about design. What kind of visuals your work needs to register. And the audience—you have to keep listening to the audience, not to see what they want, but rather to learn how to make them respond the way you want. The first days at the O'Neill made all this alive.

INTERVIEWER

So you had the first act of a play . . .

GUARE

Because of the response at the O'Neill to the first act of *House of Blue Leaves*, I got a grant to go back to New Haven as a fellow during Robert Brustein's first year at the Yale Drama School. A TV network gave money and movie cameras to Yale so playwrights could learn how to make movies. Sam Shepard, Ken Brown, who wrote *The*

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Brig, Barbara Garson, who wrote *MacBird*, Megan Terry and I were the first group. What a remarkable year! Robert Lowell was in residence. Jonathan Miller. Irene Worth. Arnold Weinstein. André Gregory. Ron Leibman. Linda Lavin. Bill Bolcom. I wrote *Muzeeka* about all those undergraduates I saw around me, so free and happy but wondering what in adult life would allow them to keep their spirit and freedom? How do we keep any ideals in this particular society? Vietnam was starting to become a spectre that wouldn't go away.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't go back to the O'Neill after 1968.

GUARE

By 1969 the O'Neill realized that no one would ever leave. So the emphasis changed, and you had to submit a play to be chosen. The play was chosen rather than the playwright.

INTERVIEWER

You had a play done on Broadway.

GUARE

CopOut. It opened and closed. What I expected from *CopOut* I don't know. The actress—Linda Lavin played the role nobly—had to flee the stage, be shot and fall dead at the theater doors so the audience would have to step guiltily over her corpse in order to leave the theater. She only avoided being trampled on for a few days. I was depressed because the reviews were scathing: "not a review, an obituary" was the tone. I went on the maiden voyage of the QEII because maybe an iceberg would hit it; I went up to the Arctic Circle to escape the pain. All this while, we were having backers' auditions for *House of Blue Leaves.* The first act was written in one sitting, but it took me nearly five years to write the second act. I knew what the events would be, but I lacked the techni-

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cal skill to handle nine people onstage, to make the material do what I wanted it to do. But finally we thought we were ready. A friend from the O'Neill, John Lahr, told me about a director from the Guthrie Theater named Mel Shapiro. I saw his work at Lincoln Center on a Vaclav Havel play; I loved it. We got a wonderful cast, went into rehearsal. *Blue Leaves* was a success. We won the Obie and the New York Drama Critics prize, and my picture was on the cover of the *Saturday Review of Literature.* Then Joe Papp asked Mel to direct *Two Gentlemen of Verona.* The production toured around the city parks on a truck in the summer of 1971. Because of the work we had done on farce structure for *Blue Leaves*, Mel asked me if I would cut and shape *Two Gentlemen* into ninety minutes. Galt MacDermot was the resident composer that summer. By the time we opened, we had a musical that became a great success and moved from Central Park to Broadway, where it won the Tony Award. So I had a play and a musical on at the same time in New York. I was asked to do more musicals. I knew I should get back to the business of being a playwright. I didn't know quite what to do. I was in a panic. I had no new projects, having spent so much time with *Blue Leaves* and then *Two Gentlemen.* Then I remembered what my father had said.

INTERVIEWER

Write a musical hit and back to Cino.

GUARE

The Cino had ended with Cino's tragic, drug-induced suicide. But maybe it was time to get out of New York and start new Cinos. So a few of us, including Mel Shapiro, moved up to Nantucket and started a theater where we did *Marco Polo Sings a Solo.* I wrote fifteen drafts of that play. Then I realized that I shouldn't spend so much time trying to make something perfect.

INTERVIEWER

Rewriting is an art.

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GUARE

Garson Kanin once said, "Isn't it funny that not many people know how to write a play but everybody knows how to rewrite a play." That's what you have to be careful about: to whom you listen and whom you close out. And also, strangely, how to keep the radar open just in case somebody, some stranger, does throw something good at you. Answers are easy. Formulating the problem; that's the art. But finally you have to realize there are certain times when, as Valéry says, a work of art isn't finished, it's just abandoned. You have to cut bait and move on to the next work.

INTERVIEWER

Going to Nantucket meant leaving the main source of your work—New York.

GUARE

That's one of the reasons I started writing the *Lydie Breeze* plays—literally to stop looking around my city, New York, and to draw water out of a different well, a well that was also mine. Living in Nantucket got me in touch with the New England part of my past—my mother was from Lynn, Massachusetts, and my father's family is from Gloucester, Massachusetts and Montpelier, Vermont. If you die in Montpelier, you'll get buried from Guare's Funeral Parlor. My father's grandfather had been a ship captain in Gloucester. My parents were born in the 1890s, and I wanted to imagine myself back in that time and write out of that. A pre-Freudian time. I wanted to make sense out of family myths, overheards and recriminations and family legends and half-understood events that happened before I was born in 1938. When my parents were battling at night, I'd hear my mother say to my father, "Your grandfather might have been a slave driver, but you're not turning me into one of his slaves." And I'd put my hands over my ears and stay under the covers. Years later, I wondered what they were talking about, what did that mean? That time in

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Nantucket awakened a lot of that lost past in me; I was very grateful because a whole new imaginative life began once I got to Nantucket. That's all we wanted to do—arrange our lives to make our unconscious usable.

INTERVIEWER

I believe that there are four plays from this Nantucket well, three of them done.

GUARE

I wrote *Lydie Breeze* first, but that's chronologically the last. To explain the past of the characters, I wrote another play called *Gardenia*, which dealt with these people at the end of the Civil War. Then I wanted to write the magical time when these people all met during the war. That play is called *Women and Water.*

INTERVIEWER

And the fourth?

GUARE

It'll come. It'll come.

INTERVIEWER

Six Degrees of Separation is about to close at Lincoln Center after an eighty-week run, and next week you go into rehearsal with a new play, *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, also at Lincoln Center, directed by Sir Peter Hall.

GUARE

At the moment I'm the luckiest of playwrights. I belong to a theater.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you say "at the moment" so ominously?

GUARE

Isn't that the law of the theater? Not to mention life.

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INTERVIEWER

What is the definition of a successful play for a playwright?

GUARE

One that generates a new play. That's all you can hope for. To get on to the next play.

INTERVIEWER

Is there always a next play in mind?

GUARE

There'd better be. On a plane coming back from London in 1972, I got in a panic because I had no new work and said to myself, before this plane lands I'm going to have the first act of something. I don't care what it is. I can't land without having another play to work on. I wrote the first act, of *Marco Polo Sings a Solo.* I promised myself that I would never get in a situation again where a project ended, and I had nothing to go on to. If it's a success you're stuck with a terrible thing: oh my god, how am I going to repeat that? Or, if it's a failure: how do I get back in the saddle again? I like to keep a number of projects going at the same time, so the day after opening I've got something in some mid-state to get to and not have to start from scratch.

INTERVIEWER

Do you work everyday?

GUARE

I literally get sick if I don't. I like to work, I like to get up in the morning and go to work.

INTERVIEWER

What does it mean to be a playwright in America?

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GUARE

You could give two hundred answers to that. One would involve masochism. Another one: how to avoid suicide and despair. You try to find a way to support yourself that doesn't crush your life. You try to find the best people to work with.

INTERVIEWER

What's your process of writing a play? How does it begin for you?

GUARE

Each play has its own rules.

INTERVIEWER

Landscape of the Body. How did that come about?

GUARE

I lived over by the river in Greenwich Village in the seventies. It was a creepy time because of a lot of murders going on there. One morning I went to a coffee shop up the street and saw four tough kids, aged eleven or twelve, sitting in the booth. Two boys. Two girls. The boys had their sleeves rolled up to show the enrapt girls their forearms covered with an awful lot of gold wristwatches. They leaned forward like conspirators, whispering, giggling, bragging. I couldn't get close enough to hear the words. I went home and wrote down what I imagined they were saying. Later that week, I got knocked down by a speed bike. The cyclist, masked in goggles, screamed over me, "You asshole! You broke the chain on my bike!" The membrane between life and death seemed so tenuous that it's hard to tell the difference. The collision must have unlocked some buried fantasy because I went home and wrote the play very quickly. It was narrated very merrily by a dead porn star; I wrote a lot of Broadway-style songs for her because they were fun to write.

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INTERVIEWER

Do they all happen this quickly?

GUARE

No! With *Muzeeka*, for example, what was crazy was that I couldn't *begin* it. The typical trouble is with endings. Not this play. I knew what I didn't want the beginning to be, but I didn't know what it should be. It needed something lyrical. And it had to have weight, but nothing would come. I was living temporarily over a tobacco shop in New Haven. I went to my parents' apartment in New York to get some stored clothes and found a suitcase containing notebooks from two years before when I'd hitchhiked from Paris to Egypt. I opened the journals out of nostalgic curiosity. I read an entry made while hitching out of Rome, caught in a torrential downpour, running for shelter into what turned out to be the Etruscan Museum, staying there a few gleeful hours writing a long riff about wishing I'd been born an Etruscan. After that, I dropped the journal and stopped writing. But where the Etruscan entry broke off was exactly where my play picked up! The 1965 entry fit like a jigsaw into place as the 1967 beginning. Unaware, I had begun writing this play two years before, but hadn't known it until that chance discovery of the notebooks, which I just as easily could have lost or never found. Without making it sound too much like Santa's workshop, I realized the full impact of how our subconscious or unconscious never stops, how we have to keep track of everything. Because we don't know what is going to be of value to us. So, out of fear, I began keeping a journal that I now refer to over and over. In Copenhagen I found this solidly bound 250-page notebook that fits easily into the pocket. I fill up four in a year, then send away for more. I have this vision that one day I will reach into my drawer and feel it's the last volume. When I reach page 250, I'll write in "The End" and keel over.

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INTERVIEWER

What volume are you up to now?

GUARE

Volume 82.

INTERVIEWER

82 times 250? That's roughly 16,000 pages.

GUARE

16,000 indecipherable pages. Korean hieroglyphics. Once I was on the downtown bus writing in my book, and a woman next to me tapped me and said, "Excuse me. What language are you writing in?"

INTERVIEWER

Are they for publication? Like the Cheever journals?

GUARE

They're not confessional. They're workout books I use every day to keep the buzz going, the buzz that writing gives you, to stop the moss from growing over the brain and blocking that subconscious part, to stop the constant death-desire to self-censor. If I don't have anything to write about that day, I copy passages out of what I'm reading. The papers. A novel. Any writer is a sculptor who makes his own clay and then has to protect that clay in hopes of transformation. The journals are autobiographical. They're about what happens. What did Jean Rhys say? "I am my own novel." I'm my own play.

INTERVIEWER

In spite of these journals your work doesn't seem autobiographical. *House of Blue Leaves. Rich and Famous. Bosoms and Neglect.*

GUARE

In the journals I can happily be my own hero and victim. But when you translate that journal material into

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a play, you begin building a new world; and the "I" becomes just another citizen of that world to be treated with the same objective scrutiny, irony and disdain. Besides, I don't like autobiographical work where you can tell which character is the author because he or she is the most sensitive, the most misunderstood, the most sympathetic. Everybody including yourself should be fair game.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write with endings in mind?

GUARE

No. If you knew where you were going why would you bother writing? There'd be nothing to discover. I can still remember throwing up when I realized what the ending of *House of Blue Leaves* would be—that after the songwriter realized the true worth of his work he would have to kill his wife because she saw him as he was.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say something about the kind of actors you'd prefer to see in your plays?

GUARE

I love actors who are performers, who are clowns—meaning they are willing to make fools of themselves, to stride that brink of panic. I feel that Stanislavsky—at least the way he's been interpreted through the Method in America—has been the enemy of performance; I'm not interested in that style of naturalism. How we *escape* naturalism always seems to be the key. Naturalism is great for television and the small screen. Theatrical reality happens on a much higher plane. People on a stage are enormous, there to drive us crazy. I love actors who can do that.

INTERVIEWER

How do you pick a director?

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GUARE

I once asked Lanford Wilson this and he said, "Easy. I ask the potential director to tell me the story of my play, and if his story matches up with my story then perhaps we can work together."

INTERVIEWER

What's that letter you keep up there on the wall?

GUARE

It's a Xerox of a letter by William Inge to Jean Kerr. I keep it up there the way St. Jerome kept a skull in front of him, to remind me of the realities of theater. Jean Kerr wrote Inge soliciting funds for a playwrighting group. Inge replied, "Isn't helping new dramatists a little like helping people into Hell?"

INTERVIEWER

Did you know Inge?

GUARE

In 1965 I got a job at Falmouth as William Inge's assistant on a new pre-Broadway play. I needed to learn how a play was physically put together by a professional playwright. I never even asked if Inge was any good, but he'd had success and had connected mightily with audiences in the past. *Picnic. Bus Stop.* If I didn't like his work, the fault was mine. After the opening of the play, *Family Things, Etc.*, later called *Where's Daddy?*, the critic from the Boston paper had Inge on his TV show as a guest. He read Inge his review of the show with the camera on Inge's face. The review was unbelievably cruel and unexpected. Inge returned to Falmouth, went into his room and never worked on the play again. He committed suicide two years later. I learned if one is going to be a playwright one must develop armor to deal with such horrific occupational hazzards.

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INTERVIEWER

There's a line in *Rich and Famous* where the young playwright reads his review and says, "They don't print this in every copy of the paper, do they?" How do you deal with reviews?

GUARE

I deal with reviews by not reading reviews, and that's a truth. My wife reads them and gives me the gist of them so I know what the quality of my life will be the next year. Get that teaching job.

INTERVIEWER

What's the difference between writing for the movies and writing for the theater?

GUARE

The Dramatists Guild. And how it protects the playwright. In the theater, the playwright holds the copyright—actually owns the play and only leases the right to its use for a specific length of time to the producer. In the movies, the producer holds the copyright. The writer is always only a hired hand. In the movies, the writer is paid up front. In the theater, the writer takes his or her chances. There is a profound difference in knowing the playwright can forego that contractual right if he or she wishes, but it's there to use.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of experience have you had in the movies?

GUARE

It's not that working in movies is whore work, and the theater is purity. It all comes down to the people you work with. I admire Louis Malle and had a wonderful time working with him. When *Atlantic City* was finished, we looked at each other and said, that's exactly what we meant. I've been lucky. I've worked only with people I

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admired. When the producers of *Atlantic City* balked at my being on the set every day, Louis Malle gave the classic answer: "If you have someone here for the hair, why not somebody for the words?" Writing for the movies is like working on a musical. You have to recognize and accept the collaborative aspects before you start. You have to recognize what work the camera will do, what work you must not do. You underwrite a scene in the movies. The camera will pick up textures of reality that in a play would be the business of words.

INTERVIEWER

What's the main obligation of a playwright?

GUARE

I think it's to break the domination of naturalism and get the theater back to being a place of poetry, a place where language can reign. Theater poetry is not just highfalutin language you spray on the event like Fry's *Venus Observed.* Theater poetry is response to the large event, events that force the poetry. It took me a very long time to realize the mythic size of Ibsen, to see that the mechanics of plot in an Ibsen play function the same way that fate does in Greek tragedy. Truth does not exist merely in the actor feeling the heat of the teacup. Behavioral naturalism belongs to television acting and movie acting. Theater acting should be closer to Cyrano de Bergerac or Falstaff or Edmund the Bastard. Or Ethel Merman. It's about finding truth on the large scale with the recognition of the actor as performer. In real life we're all such performers. Naturalism wants to reduce us. Naturalism always seems to be the most unnatural thing. I really respect the opera notebooks of Stanislavsky where he writes about Mimi having to find her truth on the specific note called for in Puccini's music—not when she decides to feel it.

INTERVIEWER

And novels?

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GUARE

A novelist writes a manuscript, gives it to the agent or the editor, who sends it back and forth until the publisher accepts it, and one day the author finds the book in stores. But a play—a playwright has not only that wonderful, brutal period of solitude writing the play, but then the day comes when you're ready to show your work to the theater's equivalent of a publisher, the producer, and the theater's equivalent of an editor, the director. You begin working with the designers who will provide the visual entry that introduces the audience to the world you've made. You start casting and choosing actors—a process much like the painter choosing the necessary tubes of paint and what consistency and what color they should be. Ahh! With a new shade an entire world opens up.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see a theme to your work?

GUARE

Don't make it sound like English 101. Each play is a part of the one long play that is a playwright's life. I know the way each play came out of the previous play. People don't have radical shifts of consciousness in the course of their lifetimes. I can look at a play I wrote at 2:00 A.M. in 1963 the night before I went into the Air Force—*The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year*—and say, isn't that funny. I'm still dealing with the issues in that play—identity, faith, the desperation it takes people to get through their lives, the lunatic order we try to put on the chaos of life and, technically, how to get the play out of the kitchen sink and hurl it into the Niagara Falls of life.

INTERVIEWER

Now about those Jacobeans . . .

—Anne Cattaneo

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Time Relost by Marcel Proust

Paul West

It was at that point I lost all pride and sent Albertine a despairing telegram, begging her to return on any terms. All I asked was to be able to hold her in my arms for a minute three times weekly, before she went to bed.

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And if she had said once a week, I would have accepted that, such was my groveling fixation.

Alas, the telegram that answered mine came from Madame Bontemps: unopened, a harbinger of subordinate joy, and kept thus for almost half an hour while I dreamed my yearning into being: she had consented! Once a week, which was almost enough. But there are things, like funguses or warts, that attach themselves to our lives in the night and resist all efforts at removal. My little Albertine was no more, thrown by her horse against a tree while she was out riding, and it was as if the shock of that same impact stunned my own head, threw my mind off course, and I could no more write, continue, the novel of the alias, writing "Albertine" when I meant Alfred Agostinelli, who had reappeared in my life, asking to be my chauffeur, but had become my typist instead. All of a sudden, I the narrator, who now answered to the name Marcel instead of being only a despotic "I," rejected the lie I told, concocting an "Albertine" smashed against a tree when, all along, and earlier, it had been my dearest Alfred, killed in the airplane I had bought for him. What a Liar I had been, writing that, when I was intending to marry "Albertine," I would buy her both a yacht and a car, but meaning really that I was going to pay 27,000 francs for Alfred's plane and an equal amount for his Rolls Royce, even after I had pleaded with him to give up all thoughts of becoming a pilot; but he went ahead, enrolling as "Marcel Swann" at a flying school near Antibes.

What had I done? I had given him a deadly weapon, he who already had deserted me once, ostensibly because his wife, Anna (who was not his wife anyway) had hated Paris. Now, here he was again, both on and in my hands (with his bathroom next to mine so that we could hold a conversation during double privacy). I fawned on him never to leave, even when he and Anna, with fifty francs in their pockets, spent twenty on peaches, twenty on taxis, and the next day had nothing.

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He and I ate our meals in my bedroom. He and Anna made an awful racket, but I put up with it, working less and less, and allowing myself to be drawn into profitless conversations just to be near him, yet never as near as when, last thing, qua goodnight kiss, Alfred's tongue would slide into my mouth like a prospecting earthworm. Not only was I in love with the Alfred of then; I was in love with the youth, the boy, he used to be, and with the older man he would become after he had left me for the last time. Or so I thought until that dreadful day when he, who had typed the second part of my enormous book, crashed into the sea while flying solo between Antibes and Cagnes: not the most distinguished graduate of the Garbero School of Aviation. Anna watched it happen as Alfred clambered out of the cockpit and clung to the fuselage of the gradually sinking plane, shouting for help and waving in heroic panic until the sea swallowed both. If it had only been a Rolls, on terra firma, there might have been a chance of plucking him from the wreck; but two elements had failed him: air, then water, and then air again, for lack of it. I wept as I never would have wept for an "Albertine," remembering how I had taken phrases from his uncouth letters and larded them straightway into my bogus story, even urging him to write more often. An occasional lovely phrase he gave me, unwittingly, as when he wrote, without intending to please, "I shall never forget that doubly crepuscular walk (since night was falling, and we were going to separate)." Now, instead of palming such talk on an imaginary "Albertine," also "dead," I was restoring it to Alfred, at rest in the Mediterranean, asleep among careless fishes. Could this "crepuscular" fellow have been he who never closed doors and barged into rooms without looking and hummed nonstop and had the most appalling taste in music? He had been for sale, he had been bought, twice, and we would never again transact anything together.

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And from the grave, through the miasma of grief and oblivion, he, who had been a virtual prisoner in my stuffy apartment, now reached for me through the bedsheets and guided my hand into mere biography, making the petals of my opus pullulate with the poison of the mere at-hand. He profaned my dream, and I sank with him beneath the waves, into a truer bosom of remembrance.

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Mark Strand

After Our Planet

I

I am writing from a place you have never been,
Where the trains don't run, and planes
Don't land, a place to the west,

Where heavy hedges of snow surround each house,
Where the wind screams at the moon's blank face,
Where the people are plain, and fashions,

If they come, come late and are seen
As forms of oppression, sources of sorrow.
This is a place that sparkles a bit at 7 P.M.,

Then goes out, and slides into the funeral home
Of the stars, and everyone dreams of floating
Like angels in sweet-smelling habits,

Of being released from sundry services
Into the round of pleasures there for the asking—
Days like pages torn from a family album,

Endless reunions, the heavenly choir at the barbecue
Adjusting its tone to serve the occasion,
And everyone staring, stunned into magnitude.

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II

The soldiers are gone, and now the women are leaving.
The dogs howl at the moon, and the moon flees
Through the clouds. I wonder if I shall ever catch up.

I think of the shining cheeks, the serious palettes
Of my friends, and I am sure I am not of their
company.
There was a time when I was touched by the pallor of
truth,

When the fatal steps I took seemed more like the drift
Of summer crossed at times by the scented music of
rain,
But that was before I was waved to the side

By the officer on duty, and told that henceforth
I would have to invent my pleasure, carve it out of
the air,
Subtract it from my future. And I could have no
illusions;

A mysterious crape would cover my work. The roll of a
drum
Would govern the fall of my feet in the long corridors.
"And listen," the officer said, "on any morning look down

Into the valley. Watch the shadows, the clouds dispersing
Then look through the ice into nature's frozen
museum,
See how perfectly everything fits in its space."

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III

I have just said good-bye to a friend
And am staring at fields of cornstalks.
Their stubble is being burned, and the smoke

Forms a gauze over the sun's blank face.
Off to the side there is a line of poplars.
And beyond, someone is driving a tractor.

Does he live in that little white house?
Someone is playing a tape of birds singing.
Someone has fallen asleep on a boxcar of turnips.

I think of the seasonal possibilities.
O pretty densities of white on white!
O snowflake lost in the vestibules of April air!

Beyond the sadness—the empty restaurants,
The empty streets, the small lamps shining
Down on the town—I see only the stretches

Of ice and snow, the straight pines, the frigid moon.

IV

"I would like to step out of my heart's door and be
Under the great sky." I would like to step out
And be on the other side, and be part of all

That surrounds me. I would like to be
In that solitude of soundless things, in the random
Company of the wind, to be weightless, nameless.

But not for long, for I would be downcast without
The things I keep inside my heart; and in no time
I would be back. Ah! the old heart

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In which I sleep, in which my sleep increases, in which
My grief is ponderous, in which the leaves are falling,
In which the streets are long, in which the night

Is dark, in which the sky is great, the old heart
That murmurs to me of what cannot go on,
Of the dancing, of the inmost dancing.

V

I go out and sit on my roof, hoping
That a creature from another planet will see me
And say, "There's life on earth, definitely life;

"See that earthling on top of his home,
His manifold possessions under him,
Let's name him after our planet." Whoa!

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Robert Phillips

On a Drawing by Glen Baxter

"For a few years, I managed to eke out
a meagre living as The Human Yo-Yo."
But I tired of the unnatural activity,

arms folded, legs tucked, head bent,
going toward the sod like a Duncan Imperial
(those expensive blockheads.) Once oriented,

you cannot imagine the effort to reverse direction,
rotating still, sometimes fighting
nausea, straining to rewind, to rewend

my way back. My act was revolutionary,
but it made my head spin. And he who sent me
reeling took glee in casting me out faster

each time—wham, WHAM, WHAMMO!—until I thought
my spine would snap. It's hard on the neck,
too. Oh the tricks he made me do!

Mastering Cat's Cradle was not easy,
intricate string designs while suspended
in midair. How humiliating to perform

Walk the Dog down on my knees!
(He even made me wear a spiked collar
and bark ferociously.) But

the last straw, he urged me to perform
Around the World. I told him to bugger off.
Now I hear he's latched onto a model

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who Glows in the Dark. Befitting one
    so unenlightened. As for me, I'm employed
in a bar as a Dwarf Tossee. I'm small enough,

nearly. I wear helmet, elbow and knee pads,
    the wall is Velcro, so is my suit.
If they're not too drunk and toss me right,

I stick, don't feel a thing, hardly.
    What the hell. After The Human Yo-Yo,
it's an act of downright upward mobility.

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Three Poems by Andrew Hudgins

The Visible Man

Grandmomma plucked pin-feathers. I stared
into the cavity and tried
to imagine such jumbled, meaty things
inside my belly. She saved the liver
and tossed the heart aside. "How come
you're throwing that away?" *The Bible says*
you're not supposed to eat a heart.
But when she wasn't watching me,
I snatched it from the sink—the heart—
and salted it and peppered it
and ate it raw. She never noticed,
which was itself a victory.
When, younger, I stared at the burners,
Momma would say, "Uh-uh, don't touch."
I gawked. How had she read my mind?
"Your life's an open book to me,"
she laughed. It made me wild. I'd yell,
pout, kick the kitchen cabinet, sulk.
I wanted to be subtle. I longed
to waft among my family, the world,
like Casper the not-so-friendly-ghost
or a malicious Topper. Newsflash:
it didn't work. When I walked past
the teevee, Momma snapped, "Sit down!
You make a better door than a window."
I'm too, too solid flesh, I guess.
Inside The Visible Man, I'd glued
the heart, lungs, kidneys, and intestines—
so orderly, so educational
I seldom got confused.
But inside me? I had my doubts.
Mom said that I was made of snips
and snails and puppy tails. That changed
to piss and vinegar. Then meanness,
pure meanness. I liked the dignity of that.

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Mother's Funeral

I heaved my thick world history book
above my classmates' heads. It arced,
flapped open, boomed against the blackboard.
Two girls screamed, all the tough boys laughed,
and I felt pretty good until someone,
as always, told. Old Parker let me choose:
five swats or five dull hours copying
from history books. And thus I learned,
in Egypt we'd have painted
a butchershop on Mother's tomb
so she would not be forced, in death,
to eat her excrement. Instead,
when we looked down the hill we saw
heat shimmer in the Big K parking lot.
And right in front of us we saw
a closed steel casket. Some lost Egyptian myths
exist as openings—and nothing else—
scratched out by punished schoolboys.
And at my desk, pencil in hand,
I wished for a more brutal teacher,
one who had lashed those slack boys till
they'd written all of it, from start
to ever-after. We squirmed on folding chairs
and watched my father's brother preach
too long. Grandmother sulked because
my father hadn't let her choose
the funeral dress. In Egypt, we'd seal
her organs in canopic jars,
except the heart, which stays in place.
We'd pack the corpse with natron, rub
spice, resin, ointment into it.
Inside the linen strips, we'd tuck
gold amulets and scarabs. We sat
on rusty folding chairs—four boys,
one man. I tried to pray for her.

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Then I tried not to pray. I wanted
to jump into the hole and shovel,
myself, the damp red chunks of clay.
But the grave was already dug,
and the sides draped with grass-green rugs
as if we didn't know that God,
who exhales life into red clay
also inhales. And my red-headed mother
would stand in her blue Sunday dress
before the forty-two confessors.
They'd question her and she'd say no
to *eater of the blood, eater of the shadows,*
flame head, breaker of the bones, wry head,
white tooth. The jackal-headed god
would lift her heart and balance it
against the feather, Truth. And then
she'd pass into an afterlife
much like this life but somehow better.
And those of us among the living
turned to an uncle droning on
about the love my mother had
for all of us and all the love
we had for her and it's all true,
each pointless word of it. The priest
dips his right little finger in
an alabaster flask and dabs
the god's brow with the sacred oil,
and, thus sustained, the forces of the holy
lift, for another day, their burdens.
A car door slammed. My uncle droned.
It seems my mother's death was good.
I'm not sure how the logic worked,
though I'm a Christian too. He paused,
and, with a hum, electric motors
lowered the casket. Every fifth day
priests shoulder the god and carry him
through town. They strain to feel his promptings
as he leans left or right, grows heavy,

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becomes lighter. Down in the parking lot
a radio blared "Purple Haze."
"Amen," my uncle said. We all
shook hands and talked about the heat.
Nobody talked of Isis gathering
from marsh grass, part by part, the flesh
of scattered Osiris, who isn't real.
But I had not yet read world history.
I talked about the heat, hummed "Purple Haze,"
and tapped the bass line on my thigh.

Ashes to fucking ashes, dust to dust.

Fist

My Daddy slapped my hand against my cheek.
"Don't hit yourself. Why are you hitting yourself?"
He held my wrists, and laughed. I cried. My hands,
completely out of my control, slapped me.
And then I did it to my brother, whom God,
in his great wisdom, delivered unto me
each time our parents left the house. With glee,
I'd smack his pink face till he begged,
and then a little longer.

Fifteen or so,
I wondered how I'd take a punch if some
drunk in a bar demeaned me or my woman.
I'd stand before the mirror and punch my face.
"Not good enough," I said. "You flinched."
I got up off the floor and tried again.

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Two Poems by Susan Abraham

Miniatures

I

When the man can't sleep, he builds
a matchstick replica of Auschwitz
in his basement, working from memory.

II

A child's china tea set has service
for six small mouths. Sitting cross-legged
on the floor, the girls pretend to sip from empty cups.

III

From the airplane, the farm is a square;
the hearse is a box filled with people
whose tears are too tiny even to glisten.

IV

The space on a bird's face
between the two eyes and the beak
is just large enough to be pierced by a slender arrow.

V

The woman dreamed that when he left
he took the floor beneath her with him.
It was a short dream, just a little thing.

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Quick, Before the Wind

Ask the sand crabs for an inch by inch
description of my hips:
they've been scaling the depression I left
in the sand for hours. Quick,
before the wind fills in the parallel canyons,
note the lengths of my legs
that never stretched into willowy limbs,
but knew when to stand and when to lie down.
My thin wrists barely left
a trace; my ankles attract the interest
of sea gulls. Of the feet,
all you see are deep heels—a shame
you could not meet the toes.
But this is just a trace of the back of me:
had you come in time, we could have met face to face.

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Three Poems by Caroline Knox

Chicago 1985

Here are the parrots, she says, which Mayor
Washington,
the Mayor of Chicago,
in that apartment on Lake Michigan
(a sunny seventh floor), here are his parrots
on South Shore Drive. Mayor Harold
Washington, he lives there when he's here
but his parrots live there all the time
in their parrot apartment house
which looks like a bale of hay in a tree
with doors in it with parrots in them.

That's what *she* says, anyhow, and he says
his Old and Lousy Railroad Joke. And here
it is, he tells us. Man comes into little
southern railway station. "I've got to
get to Chicago in the worst way." "Take the Nickel
Plate."

Yet not to be outdone, this third voice says
his Early Early Sixties Joke to us.
RFK and JFK
and Mayor Daley I are in a chopper
over Lake Michigan fairly near O'Hare.
The engines conk completely out,
and there's only one parachute.
So they vote on who will get it,
and Mayor Daley I wins, nine to four.

On a Fairfield Porter day, she says,
a qualified Yankee writes this trope of flight,

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which dedicates itself to Steve
Goodman, who wrote "The City of New Orleans,"
who came from Chicago, the city theme and text,
and adversary subject matter, where Hoosiers
range all along the southern border.

Why don't the parrots go south, she says.

Finally, here is something that is true.
In nineteen hundred sixty-seven,
Mayor Daley I said to Gwendolyn Brooks,
"People think that Picasso hates Chicago
and that is why he inflicts his pictures on us.
Write a poem for us about Picasso."

Sleepers Wake

Karen made a poem
walking to rehearsal
about children making angels
seeing angels in the chimney flames
Karen is the tall one
with braids down her back
She's old enough to be
like a lady and have the braids
on her head like a princess

This is the song called *Glory in the*
Highest, it has to be loud
It's just about all one note
and we have to hold our mouths right
for this one especially, *Glory*
I'm sorry for the altos
They have to sing *O* on A
for bars and bars and bars
Karen is the solo, she is a snob

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The breathing
is theatrical as all getout
There are almost no crescendoes
We're so loud now
we couldn't make one anyway

Not one of us knows anything about it
but we have to sing in German
and over again in English
translated by Henry S. Drinker:
Wake awake for night is FLAAAAAAAH-
ying. The watchman on the height
is CRAAAAAH-
ying. It's Cantata 140
Wachet auf by J.S. Bach
with an extended (is it ever extended)
chorale in the middle

Going home in the snow is boring
It's so dry and dark and cold
I am a fabulous robot
We boot and squeak the snow and belt the others
Karen will tell, she can mind her own beeswax
and just like darkness in summer, spring and fall
Mom and Dad will do their boring joke

SHADRACH MESHACH AND TOBEDWEGO

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Nashotah

Several people from Chelsea, seminarians and clergy,
in the wand of the Oxford Movement transported to
America,
made their way out to the Territory, out to
Wisconsin,

and up the Root River, full of *racines* and so named
therefor,
to build the Red Chapel (1842) and the Blue House (1844)
on the bank of Upper Nashotah Lake. The place was
called the Mission,

Nashotah Mission. The idea was to baptize
the Oglala Sioux by total immersion.
They looked at the world through horn-rimmed
spectacles.

The glacier ground this lake and others
as it gouged through the prairie in Paleozoic time.
But who would name a town after the bottom of a
lake? *Fond du Lac?*

They sang the Holy Office around and around the
calendar.
The idea was to train priests of the Lord
after the order of Melchizedech.

They said, "Offer it up," over and over. Then, they
offered it up.

"Mr. Kemper, today is Thursday.
You are to read the morning service in Green Bay
on Sunday. I suggest that you start walking."

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Three Poems by Steven Graves

A Run Along the Blackened Rhine

Monuments: They arrest the eye
like these twin tongues of ruddy stone
adorning Basel's riverside.
Tall enough to span the Rhine
upon reflection. Monuments
enlarge upon the story. They
lend a certain slant: The minster's
breathless firmament makes all
beneath its vault tiptoed to
in echoes. There lies the infant prince
chiseled at his mother's waist,
an effigy besmocked in armor
which he never wore and could
not lift. Their pair of masks perform
a lovely paraphrase and closet
all obscenities. Monuments
belie our helplessness.

More to celebrate the absent one.
Built with guilty memory.
The exhausted nuisance, whom we shunned,
in afterthought we adulate.
Or the public man, a personal disgrace,
commissions artists, whose tactful hands
create a blessedness in stone.
But most of what is noble wears
no marble, has no public shrine.
I remember grandfather.
Tumors had excavated
his left hip until collapse.
They fused his bones, made him lifelong lame.

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An elevator operator
in the Federal Building.
The winter of his death he took me
to his room and held my hand
against the thickened post of bone.
He leveled no complaint. I held
the haft of his predicament,
no more, no less abiding than
the poplars at the river's edge.

Sandbar on the Colorado

My voice then quietly intoned:
Let me be transfigured.
Let me know the opulence of night.

Let the air be trimmed with sound,
breezes rubbing wood and stone,
fingers moving on a mandolin.

Let there be a spit of sand
and gather couples there to dance,
partakers of each other.

Let the moon extend its gown
that I might see, not stunt or show,
but mingling long and obstinate.

Partners who know the other's time
to rise and turn, the course
apart, the time of the return.

This eddying, whistling river,
dances in the canyon
of its making. The land and water

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form a flowing chute of stone,
deep and ever deepening,
shading moss and fern and box elder.

On its face are hewn colors,
no two of which are distant,
no two mistaken for the same.

Let me dance this night, learn from
time the dancing to endure.
See. He slips his arm once more

around her waist and chases
still her fluent hand, wheeling.
The river near, the sweet, sweet noise.

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Recessional

Again this first fall weekend our children dance
(There is little dancing here without our dancers.)
They've returned to college, adding to the distance.
We enter this season of fogs and wistfulness
with joints more fouled, our weights up (though no one had to guess.)
Harriet at least is back having outlived cancer.

The grasses and the wooden sprigs, thin as grass,
intrude and plagiarize the summer cabin's floor.
They're passive till the spring's offensive. Nights surpass
the days. Our getting up each morning is hard won.
The untouched apple orchards riot, the apples burn.
The blind of memory makes a constant labor.

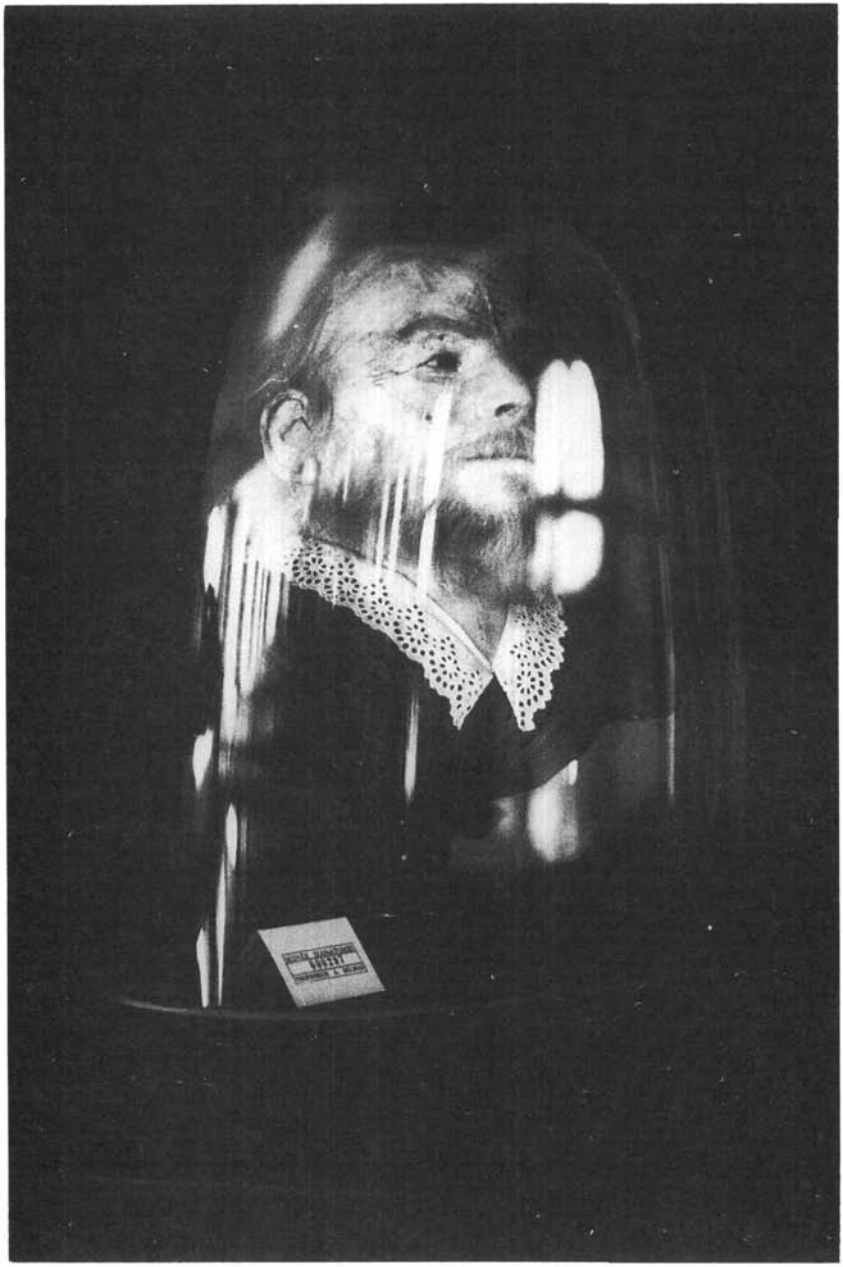
Friends for the summer's end, so many of us gone.
Many moved, lost jobs, split up and still estranged,
kids grown. So many at the lodge are now unknown.
My wife repeatedly must ask their names. This stage
of cooler sun depicts the cabins in their age,
slipping deeper into the wood, and yet a woodland changed.

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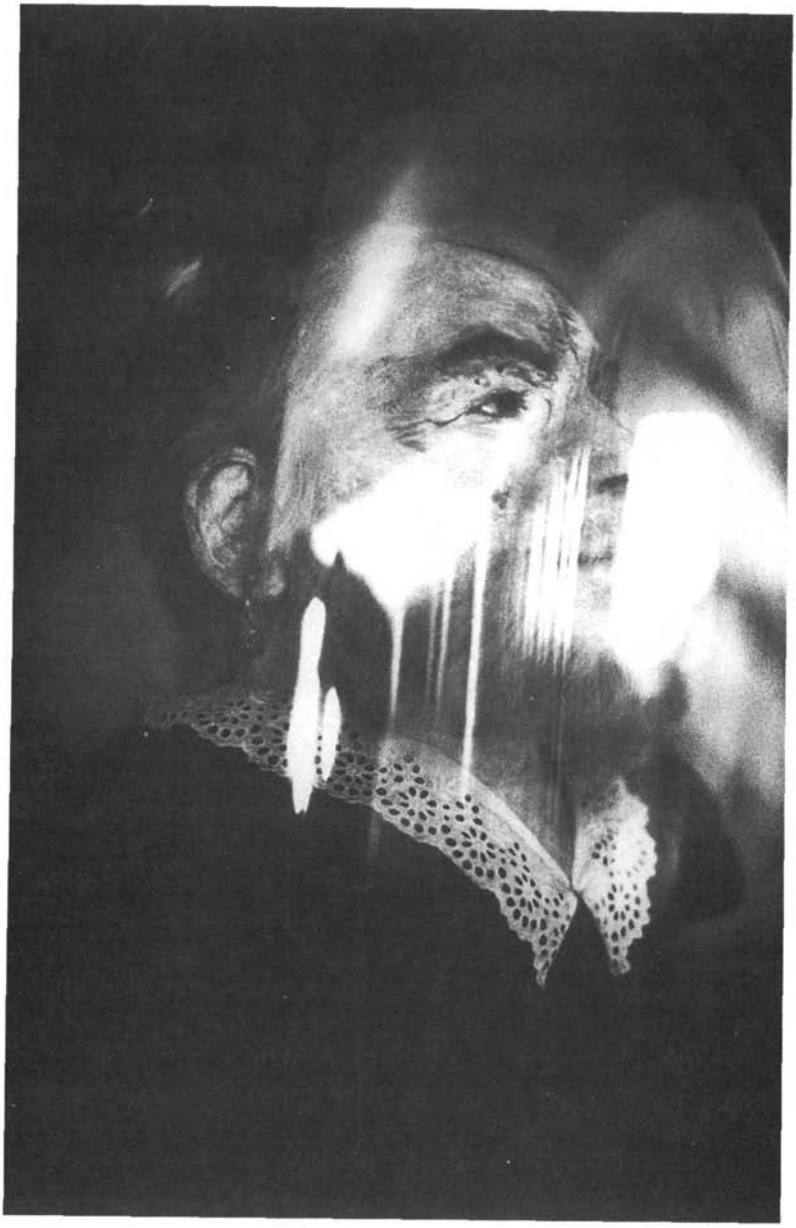
Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman, Musée Orfila

Zoe Leonard

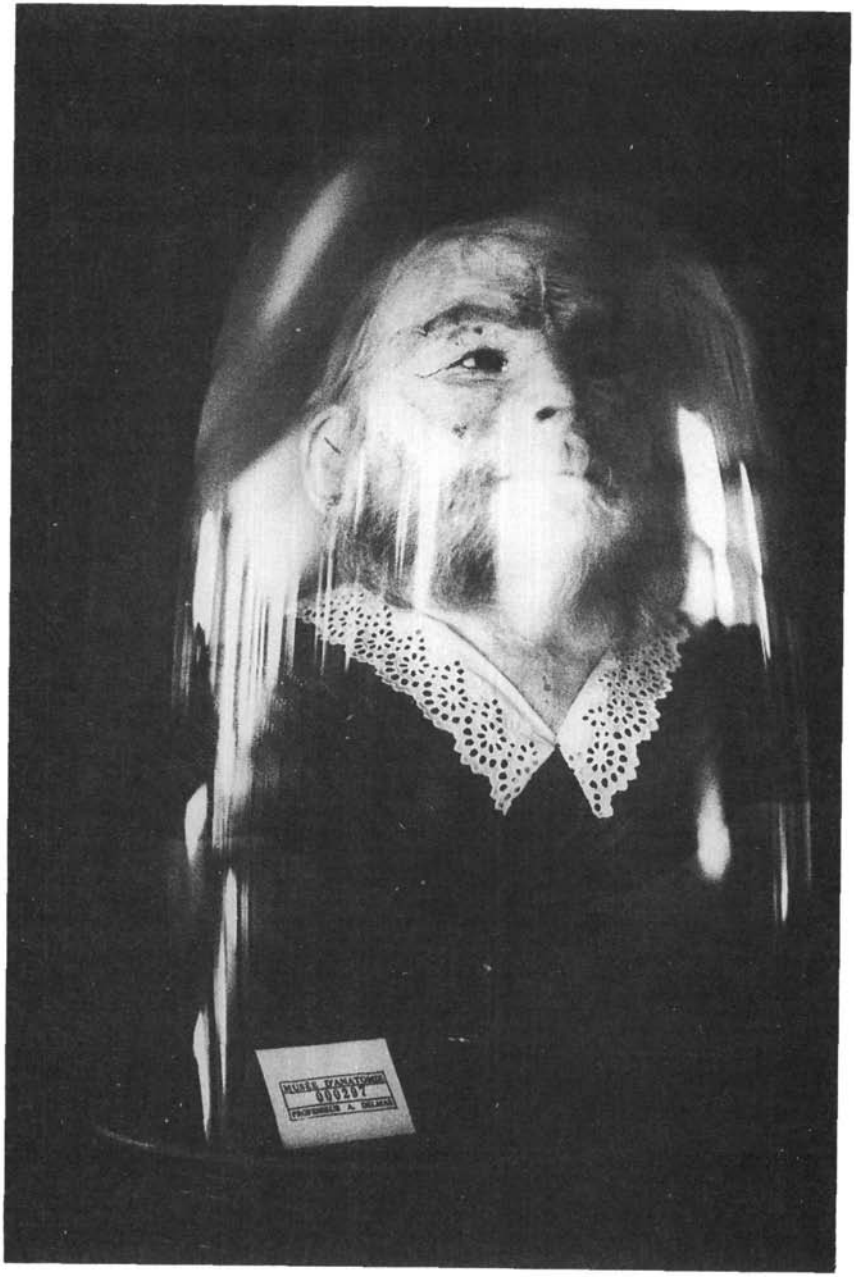
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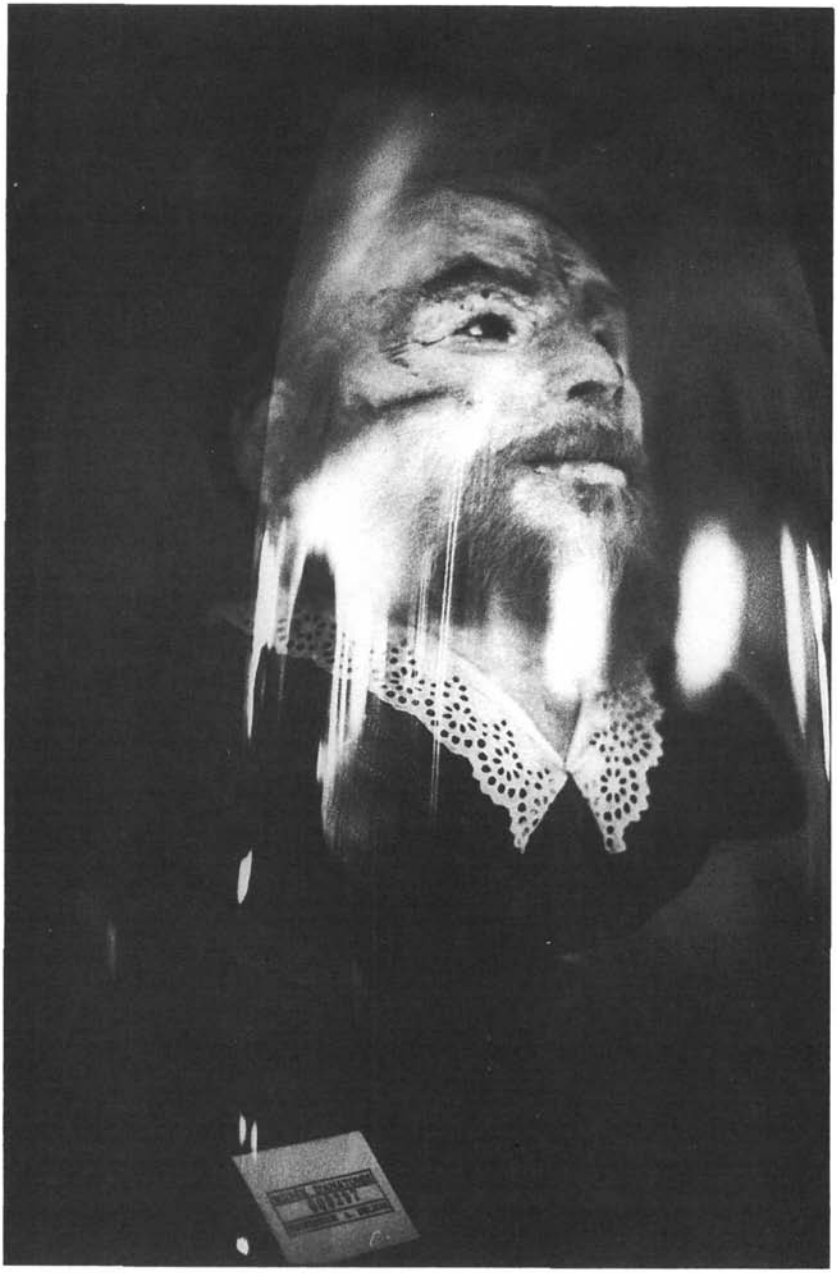
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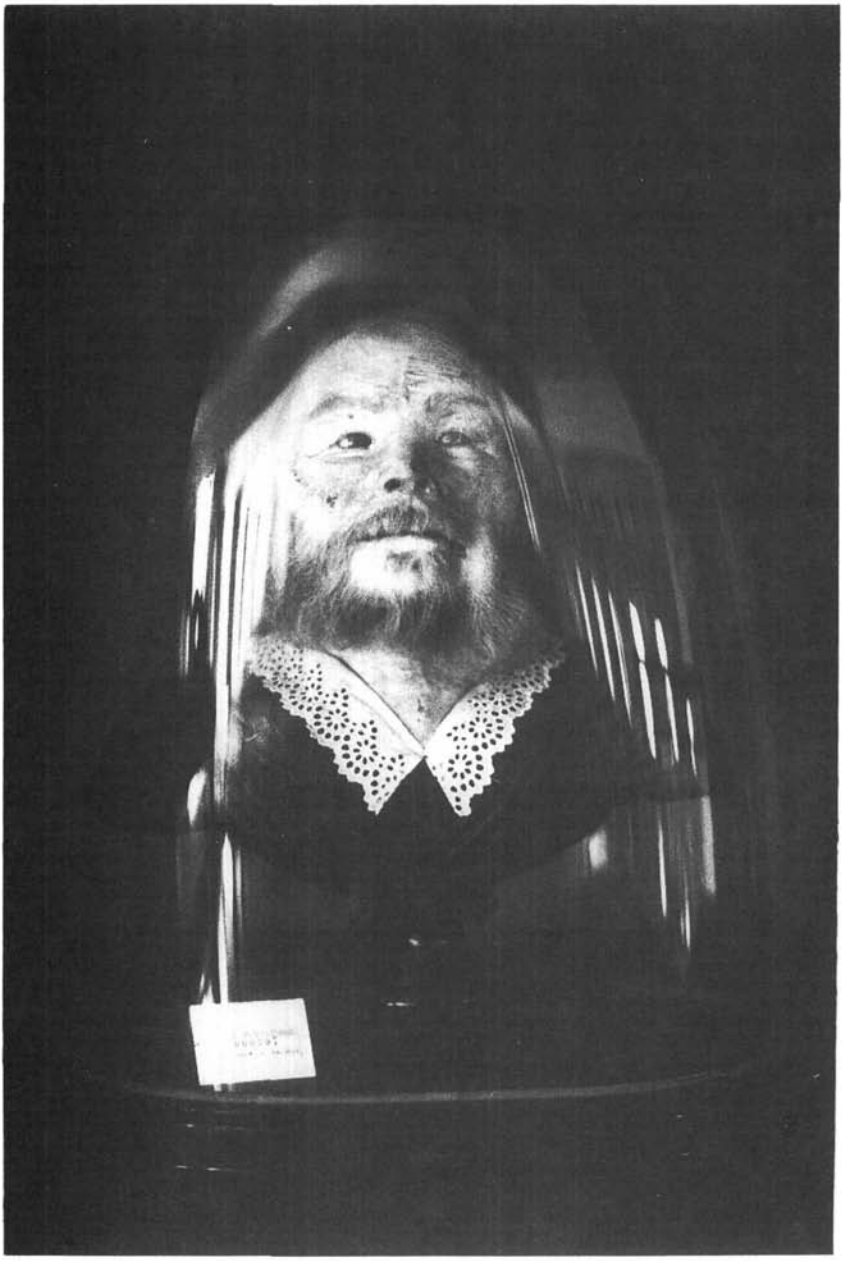
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The Interior of North Dakota

Barry Lopez

The Bergdorf Hills rise unobtrusively in south-central North Dakota east of the badlands and were not fully described until 1923, in a book by the youngest son of a prominent New York family, Meyer Bergdorf, who went west at the age of twenty, exasperated by the wealth and insouciance of his parents.

Bergdorf disembarked the Great Northern Railroad at Bismarck in May, 1918. He took three disheveled Lakota into his employ, outfitted them and rode south into the basin of the Heart River. He told the Indians he only wanted to look into that country, that he wasn't searching for anything specific. Indeed, he had intended to get off the train in Fargo, but gazing from the train door at Fargo's streets and stores he'd been so put off by the town's earnestness he'd returned to his seat.

The Lakota Bergdorf elected to travel with—the whole party drew smirks of bemusement from the stable men and shop clerks who fitted them out—took Bergdorf

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initially for an impulsive and presumptuous man, common features to them of white culture. But they were intrigued by the diversion he offered. When they saw that he could ride and, once they were clear of Bismarck, that Bergdorf rode alertly, studying the ground as if gleaning it; when they found he wasn't an incessant talker, they were pulled in by his determination. The alcoholic daze in which he'd found them began to fall away, like rotten and sour clothing.

At dusk on the first day they camped in country vaguely familiar to the Lakota. By the second day, moving always at Bergdorf's scrutinizing pace, they'd crossed to the south bank of the Heart and followed the river into a landscape none of them knew. Bergdorf studied the woody draws and stared at the grassy swales with their clusters of wild roses. The trail sign in the short grama grass showed nothing of the passage of horses or cattle. It was now only that of wild creatures. The eldest Indian, a man in his fifties called Weasel Confused by Sparrows, said they should cleanse themselves before they went any farther. They should build a sweat lodge the next morning.

Weasel Confused and the others, a man about forty named Five Handed Horse and a younger man called Wind That Comes at Night, remained aloof with Bergdorf but each had come to a similar conclusion—that the young man was possessed. They thought he was headed to a specific place. Five Handed, heavyset and with short hair, remembered a story he'd heard when he was young, about some low hills that now lay to the south of them. It was a holy place, like the Black Hills where he and the other two had grown up. But, he told Bergdorf, these were very much smaller and treeless hills. And they were sacred to the Crow. (The Crow, the three Indians reflected privately, had once been their traditional enemies. Now, with all that shattered, it almost made no difference. If that was where this white man was headed, they would go.)

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The next morning they built a sweat lodge close to the river, a willow frame covered tightly with wool blankets. Weasel Confused said he couldn't remember all the proper prayers or what their sequence was. But he assured Bergdorf that the purification would put life into them, no matter. When Bergdorf asked how well he knew the rite, Weasel Confused said, "I am using all the knowledge I have."

Bergdorf appreciated the rising sense of gravity in his companions and the emergence of their enthusiasm. He had asked them to accompany him—he'd found them sleeping in the city's park—partly as a show of contempt for the burghers of Bismarck but also because he wasn't entirely confident of his own skills. He assumed these three swarthy men—Night Wind wearing rimless dark glasses and a fedora, all of them dressed in rumpled trousers and mismatched suit coats—knew the country. They knew it, he found out later, no better than he did. They had arrived only two days before, on the train from Dickinson.

Late in the afternoon, after they'd sweated, Five Handed Horse approached Bergdorf and extended his hand wordlessly. Bergdorf, slicing bacon for dinner, knew instantly what he wanted. He handed Five Handed the Colt .38/40 and three cartridges. A few hours later he and Night Wind came back with a mule deer, a small doe.

The next morning, Bergdorf records, the four of them worked quietly at personal chores in the warming light. Bergdorf, whose nearly chronic disaffection had begun to abate, wrote and drew in a pasteboard journal. Five Handed, having restitched the split uppers of his two-toned wing tip shoes, was helping Weasel Confused cut and dry the deer's flesh. Night Wind, a heavily pock-marked man with delicate hands, was painting his horse's face, a row of yellow bars down the muzzle and white circles around the eyes.

They left long before noon and rode the rest of the day

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south before they entered the low hills which Five Handed could remember no name for. Bergdorf, then and there, named them the Four Man Hills; but in a journal entry a few days later he says that naming them at all was a mistake. He meant to follow Weasel Confused's advice and inquire among the Crow as to their name.

The four of them spent a week there. The Lakota, in Bergdorf's estimation, rose visibly to a level of splendid awareness, of hawklike and wolverinelike behavior, economical and deliberate in their activities. Bergdorf, wandering the hills, sometimes astride his Appaloosa mare, sometimes on foot, focused his obvious pleasure on flowers. Though he knew almost nothing of botany, he examined several dozen species closely enough to draw them in their entirety. The drawings are clumsy, with no variation in the thickness of his line or the pressure of his pencil, but they are evocative and charming—a young man's self-conscious act of respect.

Just as they had not discussed the hills as a destination, so they did not later discuss their departure, but only rose one morning after a week and left. (In reading Bergdorf's journal, one is compelled by the short, enigmatic entry of his fifty day in the hills to believe that something unusual took place here, a kind of epiphany for Bergdorf, certainly, but of a sort he could not at first imagine, or which he didn't care to try to explain. Perhaps it wasn't obvious to him. But some realization of self-worth, an infusion of joy, seems to have reached him. The entries that follow on the return trail to Bismarck, where the journal abruptly ends, are marked by an attitude of profound courtesy and a prepossessing tone not present in the earlier entries.)

The riders, ranging far out to both sides of their original trail, returned to Bismarck in three days. Bergdorf alone no longer determined their route. They rode easily together, following each other by turns, a rhythm determined by the roll of the land and their combined idiosyn-

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crasies. A day out of town, Bergdorf took certain of his possessions—a heavy overcoat, some packaged food, an extra pair of trousers—and set them in a neat pile on the gray white trunk of a fallen cottonwood. Night Wind lay his rimless dark glasses alongside.

In Bismarck, Bergdorf sold the horses back to their original owner. He gave each of his three companions twenty dollars and some store-bought items—shoes, a small traveling bag for each one, a saddle blanket for each man. He got them rooms in the Centennial Hotel and treated them to dinner in the dining room. Bergdorf had by now the same dark patina of the trail the other three had had when they'd met. People glared at them while they ate. One or two, Bergdorf writes, murmured in disgust.

Bergdorf could not sleep that night. He dressed and went down to the livery stable where their horses were corralled—his Appaloosa, Weasel Confused's strawberry roan, the sorrel gelding that Five Handed had ridden and the two paints, Night Wind's and the pack animal. They nickered at his presence and then bore off slowly into the far dimness of the corral.

The Lakota were gone in the morning. They took the night train to Dickinson, the station agent told him.

Bergdorf boarded the train east that morning. A week later he enlisted in the American army. On August 1, 1918, he was shot dead north of the Marne River in the Meunière Wood. His eldest sister, Isabel, succeeded in having his journal published by a small press in Connecticut in 1923. In a brief introduction she writes that her brother returned to New York from North Dakota burning with a sense of purpose and "marvelously poised." (It was she who petitioned the United States Board on Geographic Names to call the Bergdorf Hills after her brother.)

During the American depression of the 1930s, much of the settled land to the south and west of Bismarck was

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deserted. Ranching operations established along the Heart River as recently as the twenties went out of business. large sections of Morton and northern Grant counties were acquired by banks in Bismarck, Fargo and Minneapolis in default of loans. After the Second World War, most of these several hundred square miles of abandoned land were absorbed in the already huge holdings of ranches and farms on the surrounding shortgrass prairie. With so many documents involved, however, some parcels were unintentionally deeded to two different owners, some foreclosed land was assigned but never deeded and some parcels were deliberately sold twice, by itinerant land operators.

In May 1958, a records clerk in the state archives in Bismarck began to sort through this confusion and legerdemain—a private preoccupation. Partway through she realized that a section of nearly twenty square miles in the drainage of the Heart River, including the Bergdorf Hills, was mostly without clear title and also unoccupied. The counties involved had not taken any notice because the taxes on the undeeded land had always been paid—since 1937 the aggregate of land had been apportioned in the tax parcels of twelve different ranching families. The ranches in question had not put stock on the sections because their fence lines followed the boundary lines described in their original deeds.

The clerk, a divorced woman without children named Lenore Crandall, traveled on her own, bit by bit, all across the undeeded land. She finally determined that the Bergdorf Hills themselves, about ten square miles, had never been occupied, and that little of even the deeded land along the south bank of the Heart River was being ranched. In 1963 Crandall bought a house near the Bergdorf Hills and moved there, fifty miles from Bismarck. She continued to work for the state. She explored widely around her home and in later years she painted, mostly images from her childhood in Chicago, though in her last years she began to

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paint the landscape of the Bergdorf Hills. Her journals of exploration are painstaking in their detail and striking in the range of subjects that held her attention, from the germination of grasses to the hunting behavior of swift foxes.

In the spring of 1977 I met Lenore Crandall while looking for work around Bismarck. I'd heard that a man was hiring in Almont, a small town to the east, and had gone there but found no one hiring and no work. I'd started out along the road south away from Almont with the idea of finding work in Rapid City, but also because the country in that direction, at that time of year, was beautiful. I am a decent-looking man, dress neatly and am not alarming or offensive in my manner, so do not anticipate trouble in getting rides. It was Lenore Crandall who stopped for me.

She lived about ten miles south of Almont, on the Heart River. In those few miles we had an amiable conversation, the sort of conversation you can have when no one has any pressing plan of action, no clear object of desire. She asked me if I would like to stay for dinner and overnight. It was not the last time I was to be startled by her. I said yes. I remember most acutely, I think, her integrity with a stranger. And her generosity. In the morning I went on my way, promising to write when I settled somewhere for the winter.

I kept up my correspondence, and before she passed away in 1983, at the age of seventy, I managed to visit her twice at her home. Her attraction for me lay in that peculiar tension some people are able to affect by maintaining intimacy in their conversation while actually revealing little of their private lives. The last time I saw her, I brought her a present, a copy of Meyer Bergdorf's book, which I'd found in Salt Lake City. I picked it up initially out of curiosity, but finished it excited by a sense of coincidence. Lenore read it through that same night. The following morning she seemed both pensive and ebullient. She told me, then, for the first time, about the

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Bergdorf Hills, about their disposition and how she'd discovered them.

I had never heard such a story, and as much as I respected her I was skeptical. There was always a part of Lenore that was slightly out of reach. It wasn't that she was unapproachable but that part of her was unattainable, as when a person doesn't have words or experience enough to grasp a particular frame of mind. She read to me all that morning from her journals. As I listened to her descriptions I saw that unattainable part of her more clearly than I ever had before. She described how she reached the Bergdorf Hills by following a path, hidden from the road, down the Heart River, before turning south at a certain spot. It wasn't until she said this that I realized I had never seen the Bergdorf Hills. They were not visible from her home. You could barely make them out from the road.

Lenore's gratitude for a copy of Bergdorf's book was extreme. I thought, after all that had passed between us that morning, the significance of what she had revealed, that she would invite me to walk with her into the hills. But she did not.

I learned of her passing several months after she died. A letter from probate court reached me in Omaha and I came back up to North Dakota. She'd left me a small amount of money and, to my surprise, the house with its few acres on the Heart River. I slowly realized that Lenore had made me aware of a certain aspect of my own isolation, and I was very grateful to her.

One morning, feeling somewhat apprehensive and also a little doubtful, I walked east along the Heart, down to the spot that Lenore had described. I then headed south toward the Bergdorf Hills. I'd not gone very far before I felt I could go no farther. The character of the land had changed distinctly in less than a mile. It had risen up gleaming, like a painting stripped of grime, the prairie colors richer, the air more prismatic. The smell of sun-warmed grasses and brush had become dense and

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fresh. I was still eager to go on, but in the face of this intensification I felt like an interloper. What was here, the undisturbed brilliance, belonged, it seemed, to Meyer Bergdorf and his Lakota friends and to the unheard-from Crow, and to Lenore.

That afternoon I withdrew because it was so obvious to me that I was unprepared. I was also afraid. The vividness of the land was intimidating. It had in every detail the penetrating aura, the immediacy, the insistence of a creature viewed through ground glass. The intertwining of wild rose thickets, the wind rushing the broad leaves of summer cottonwoods and the calls of meadowlarks, a sound like running water, held me up. I turned on my trail and walked back to the river. I knew that I would return, but it would be with a desire clearer and deeper than what I then possessed. I had little doubt now that these hills would open out on a landscape of "unreasonable extent," as Lenore had indicated, and that if I were patient I might come to see aspects of the hills that were also bewildering and terrifying.

That night I sat at Lenore's dining table reading her journals, all that was left of her personal effects. The Chicago paintings had been sold. The canvases she'd painted in the Bergdorf Hills, which I'd seen and now knew were full of disguise, had been taken from their frames and destroyed. She had asked that I read and destroy her journals. I considered her request wrongheaded, an act of selfishness. I understood, though she had not been explicit, that she wanted me to care for the Bergdorf Hills after she was gone. It might be years before they were entered, but she thought it would probably not be long before computers discovered the patchwork of deeds, the errant tax structure. Legal ownership of the hills would be settled on someone. By that very act, she believed, parceled and possessed, their vividness would pale, their pungency and reso-

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nance fade. They would become another, almost indistinguishable part of the prairie. Against that eventuality, or at least until then, she had suggested to me—always indirectly, but with a passion that in other women is sexual—that I stay on.

So my plans are very simple. I'll finish reading her journals. I'll try to imagine as I read, though it runs against her wishes, whether there might not be some way to preserve the ecstatic and wondrous tone of her work. The reverie with which she writes of the Bergdorf Hills; whether by calling the hills by some other name, by giving them a different geography, I can't see to the publication of the journals. For she wrote not only of the charm and beauty of the land but of its darkness, about the panic of being lost in it, its resolute indifference, of how lean and hard it had made her, of how profound an order had come to her core through all her foot travel, her night sleeps, in these inconspicuous hills.

I will finish the journals then and think on that. And then, one day, I will walk off into that country to see it for myself. I'll imagine the Crow there, and their traditional enemies the Lakota. I will travel, I am certain now, with a companion, another person with whom it will be possible to speak and to imagine. Then if the hills should indeed disappear, if they should be realized in some other way, there will, at least, be our stories to preserve the memory of travel there.

I will step off into that country with the possibility of fathoming, perhaps, what made Lenore, on that last night that I saw her, rise and wander off into the dusky light along the Heart River like an anguished bear. And I will know, perhaps, what Bergdorf meant when he wrote, "In all my travels I have never known a country so sweet, so redolent with the earth's perfume, nor air so full of light. When I think on my companions, different from me and whom I barely know, I sense the same resolve in

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them to strip away the horror of what we have accepted. I look on these hills, writing by the light of the full moon this evening, and know that, though this land is not mine nor ever could be, that for what I have found here I would die. These hills, their deer and badgers, their calling coyotes, the azure, red and yellow species of birds, have lifted me out of myself. My anger is diminished, my loneliness gone."

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Two Poems by Martha Hollander

The History of Art

These days our artifacts live in dormitories,
prisons, adopted homes; the world's museums.
Fragments of stone and bone, white figurines,
sneering gargoyles, gods of politics,
panels coated with the juice of bugs
and grass, with the slime of egg and flakes of gold,
bronze monarchs arrayed in leprous patina.
Visiting them, we slow down, straighten up,
as if we were approaching an open coffin
or rows of newborns behind the hospital glass.

Set in the floor is their godfather, the mummy.
His fingernails still glow pink, his frozen face,
black and well-bred, records eternal shock
at a hundred incarnations of nervous children
dragging their feet past his spotlit tomb.

At the heart of a once-great symphonic city,
the little neolithic idol hangs
modestly on indigo velvet. All
terra-cotta breasts and belly, her head
nothing but a dried raspberry, she is slowly
eating the nothingness of her glass case.

The paintings open on endless galleries
like dim courtyards, peering through a scrim
of varnish, dust, and lacy craquelure.
One day the wounds of the skinny medieval Christ
open like tiny eyes. Edged in green
—where the green essence of his body flows,
puddles, and concentrates—they face us with

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alertness and passion, heralds and witnesses
now that his own dead lids have fallen shut.

Out on the balcony, sculptures have risen up
against the river. One of them—glittering
granite shifting suddenly to basalt
at the center, diving into the lake
of richer black inside the pinkish skin—
approximates a mouth as we come near.
It isn't speaking but sleeping, opening
a small slit to the dream of stone within,
while all argument is to be found below
in the conversational rush of moving water.

Three Geographers

Bending over the map on the floor
that unfolds like a rare carpet
we trace our trip with warm, stumbling fingers.
Sometimes we link them as our hands pass
over landmasses hanging in the blue, dreaming
of spicy meals, the coldness of a church,
lovers in trains, and new words for cursing them.
Travellers begin by stirring from their beds
Like peninsulas roving from the shore.
They haul their viscera over the oceans,
packing themselves like bottled fruit, holding steady
under the protean gaze of foreigners.
Friends from birth, we will fight
and make up, change borders and dialects,
while the rock roots of earth hold us down.

In cartography you set out to solve the mystery
of roundness, twisting into view
the globe's eternally hidden places

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until the universe opening in your hands
is turned from bowl to book. You scan the text
to comprehend the shape of all we know,
but there is always touch beyond understanding.
Alone in his room, Vermeer's geographer
looks up from the immense sheet before him.
He lets his compass hover uselessly
over this mess of paper and pattern (map and carpet)
that spells the earth. Behind him, glowing
dimly from the top of a high cabinet,
is the true globe he cannot see. He gazes
instead at the window where trees, crowds,
and shimmering canals afford him a glimpse
of the unruly life thronging inside
the exquisite outlines of the continent.
There is always touch beyond understanding.
There is no solution out the window,
only the precise, metallic light as it coats,
bit by bit, the vibrating orb of the world
this day in the Netherlands, 1669.

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Three Poems by Sarah Getty

Mother, May I

During the screened-porch dinner of corn on the cob,
pork chops, tomatoes like red meat, warm and
bleeding,
I felt the first stirring. The air moved, cracked the
damp
heat that stood around the house in blocks. The
backyard

maple rustled, twenty thousand green hands waving
a signal. Robins up and down the block began
scattering their coded notes. Our yard stretched larger
as the sky lost light. Out by the lilac hedge,

imaginary shapes conspired. I had to scrape
scraps into the kitchen can, rinse and stack the plates,
while outside, I knew it, everything was starting
without me. On the porch, the kittens, one tiger,

one marmalade, were climbing right up the screens
to chase the white moths that bumped on the other
side,
dying, like dumbbells, to enter our box of light.
I stood on the sill, where tomatoes were lined up

to ripen, and unhooked the tiger from the screen.
Under the fur my fingers felt her secret, hot,
skinny body; her heart like a tom-tom hammered.
Then I heard Roger calling down the block, and John

did that whistle with his fingers. The dishes clinked
in the pan. Better not ask. Just, carefully,

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open the porch door a crack, so the kittens won't
escape from safety, and slide out, like gliding

into warm, easy water. I ran on the grass,
I was gone. The air had a secret, sweetened
and heavy, like Hawaii, like honeymoons. Kids
were lined up already, across a yard where no

father was watering, solemnly wigwagging
his hose. Red Rover was first. Whoever got named
had to charge like a ram into the other line,
try to break their phalanx of linked arms. Over

and over we flung ourselves, crashed and bounced and
broke.
Later came Mother, May I? and then Statues: grab
somebody's arm and whirl him around and around
and let go! He must freeze in whatever funny

pose he's flung into—Frankenstein, ballet dancer,
airplane, ape. Our bodies amazed us, taking shapes,
by chance, stranger than we could plan. Then,
suddenly—
"Not It!" "Not It!" "Not It!"—we switched to
Hide-and-Seek.

It was real night now, moon blue and humid. Mothers
would be calling soon. I hid in the hydrangea;
John was It. Lightning bugs rose in constellations
and sank, and rose again, blinking their welcomes. Sweat

prickled my neck, my scraped knee bled. I was hidden,
but anyway my heart beat hard. I was holding it,
secret, like a lightning bug cupped in my hand.
I was letting it rise in rhythm with its kind.

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The Wash

A round white troll with a black, greasy
heart shuddered and hummed "Diogenes,
Diogenes," while it sloshed the wash.
It stayed in the basement, a cave-dank
place I could only like on Mondays,
helping mother. My job was stirring
the rinse. The troll hummed. Its wringer stuck
out each piece of laundry like a tongue—

socks, aprons, Daddy's shirts, my brother's
funny (I see London) underpants.
The whole family came past, mashed flat
as Bugs Bunny pancaked by a train.
They flopped into the rinse tub and learned
to swim, relaxing, almost arms and legs
again. I helped the transformation
with a stick we picked up one summer

at the lake. Wave-peeled, worn to gray, inch
thick, it was a first rate stirring stick.
Apprenticed on my stool, I sang a rhyme
of Simple Simon gone afishing
and poked the clothes around the cauldron
and around. The wringer was risky.
Touch it with just your fingertip,
it would pull you in and spit you out

flat as a dishrag. It grabbed Mother
once—rolled her arm right to the elbow.
But she kept her head, flipped the lever
to reverse, and got her arm back, pretty
and round as new. This was a story
from Before. Still, I seemed to see it—
my mother brave as a movie star,
the flattened arm pumping up again,

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like Popeye's. I fished out the rinsing
swimmers, one by one. Mother fed them
back to the wringer and they flopped, flat,
into baskets. Then the machine peed
right on the floor; the foamy water
curled around the drain and gurgled down.
Mother, under the slanting basement
doors, where it was darkest, reached up that

miraculous arm and raised the lid.
Sunlight fell down the stairs, shouting
"This way out!" There was the day, an Easter
egg cutout of grass and trees and sky.
Mother lugged the baskets up. Too short
to reach the clothesline, I would slide down
the bulkhead or sit and drum my heels
to aggravate the troll (Who's that trit-

trotting . . .) and watch. Thus I learned the rules
of hanging clothes: shirts went upside down,
pinned at the placket and seams. Sheets hung
like hammocks; socks were a toe-bitten
row. Underpants, indecently mixed,
flapped chainwise, cheek to cheek. Mother
took hold of the clothespole like a knight
couching his lance and propped the sagging

line up high, to catch the wind. We all
were airborne then, sleeves puffed out round
as sausages, bottoms billowing,
legs in arabesque. Our heaviness
was scattered into air, our secrets
bleached back to white. Mother stood easing
her back and smiled, queen of the backyard
and all that flapping crowd. For a week

now, each day, we'd put on this jubilee,
walk inside it, wash with it, and sleep

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in its sweetness. At night, best of all,
I'd see with closed eyes the sheets aloft,
pajamas dancing, pillowcases
shaking out white signals in the sun,
and my mother with the basket, bent
and then rising, stretching up her arms.

Corn

Our forest, our ocean, it stretched westward from the edge
of town. Knee-high at fireworks time, taller by August
than any child. Flat as a bed the prairie, spread quilt
after quilt with green and tufted rows. Leaves waved in wind
like streamers, hung like ruffles. Each ear had its tassle—

gold silk hung down like the hair of a mother leaning
at dinnertime over the steaming stove. But really
the leaves had cutting edges, the stems were stiff, the rows
marched in regiments out to the Rockies, marched to feed
and keep us, like fathers marching against Germany,

away in rows and home again in rows. Away, and home
again, my father drove each day. Not to war, to work
at the corn plant. Not the green kind—the gray, conveyer-
belted buildings, asphalt, warehouse, a dim sun warming
the gray, stinking haze that was the only weather there.

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The smell filled every inch of air, pocket or drawer, eyes,
hair. The price of alchemy—boxcars of gold disgorged
at the siding, cracked, soaked, fermented, milled, baked, transformed
to automated streams—liquid, powder, yellow, white,
clear as water. Masked girls in Bottling watched for flaws

as glass battalions paraded beneath the spouts. Gold
was Mazola, clear Karo—names of our household gods.
Argo, too, the white starch boxed in blue, the Indian
Maiden on the front. Her body was a slender ear
of corn; her look was proud and she held, it seems to me,

a spear. Better far than the girl on the salt box, queen
of Illinois at least, she was a friend whose riches
came home to us in Daddy's pockets. Some August days
he'd stop at a roadside stand, bring home a dozen green
ears in a brown bag. (Always he carried that bad smell

of work; it hung in his clothes like a curse.) Ears the shape
of generation, lapped in tough green wrappings. I knelt
and braced them between my knees, struggled to unswaddle
those mysteries. My brother, his biceps like baseballs,
could strip an ear in three pulls. Bared, the tender rows glowed

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like pearls, translucent, taut to the touch. Inside each bump
the treasured wetness, soon to be steaming, sweet. Sneaking,
we would steal a tooth-touch just at the tip. Then we picked
from our sweat-damp arms the golden hairs of silk that stuck
there, signs, Mother said, of kids growing into corn folk,

sheathed in green and bodies all rows of bumps. One summer
we grew our own, in a garden plot down by the tracks.
You needed two rows, at least, to let the pollen waft
from male to female—those things the teacher talked about
in science. We liked it more than we would ever say,

weeding between the carrots and the beans those drawn out
summer evenings. The sky glowed gold-rose above a row
of poplars where a robin kept shaking out its scroll.
Our parents watered and hoed, now tall as the tasselled
corn, now bent to their tools like peasants. Handling

that clean-smelling dirt that felt like crumbs of silk, we slapped
happily at mosquitoes and left tribal markings
mixed of blood, sweat, and earth. Daddy, stopping for a smoke,
looked like a handsome soldier in his khakis. Mother,
our gypsy, knew the robin's language. Something older,

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bigger, and kind was working there, like a huge plow horse
gentle in its harness. Even the riotous beans
stayed in their rows and behaved around their stakes. Beyond
the garden plots a train might hoot and pass, streaming west-
ward like a straightened silver snake. We would stand and wave

a carrot or an ear of corn at diners gliding
right out of Illinois. We were not even dreaming
yet of states where land could rise in rocks and not repeat
those uniform green rows. We had our whole lives right there
in the palms of our hands. Our maps were lines drawn through corn.

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Four Poems from the Morgan Series
by Gary Mitchner

Morgan Watches *Now, Voyager*

Any emotion can be made to seem sentimental,
Mother says. Purity calls for diligence,
not a wallowing, she says, so why
did I go to this film at this particular time?
To thrash myself with the knowledge, not
the feeling, that my lover Chris has taken
an Alfred the Great in a very Anglo-Saxon way?
In what imaginable way could Charlotte Vale
help me accept the way of the stars when
my sign is the same as Jerry's, under the moon?
That sense of setting off on a cruise, was it
mine or my ex-lover's? *Now* is always easy
to say, impossible to act upon. Remember
jumping off the diving board the first time?
Or spilling over the raft at the right instance
to avoid submerged rocks among the white rapids?
And think of that second before free-falling.
It's the precision of timing that I've lost.
Everyone around shouting: "Now!" and even
Charlotte was anxious to drop everything,
though I'm wishing now for that same cinematic
transformation occurring so quickly, miraculously,
that the pain of metamorphosis dissolves in metaphor.
Mother will mock my clumsiness, scoffing at my segues.

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Worrying About Shoes

Walking could hardly concern him.
At his house, though, this topic would be
spoken of as though it were political.
Mother selected them as she bought melons.
Squeezing them, worrying the leather
until any foot might find expensive support.
Always more than whether they fit properly;
they must tell the truth about him, she said,
insisting that the message would take care of
his attitude, perception, and appearance.
One would be a coxcomb not to believe that.
Nothing must merely adapt to the practical.
Quality would come if they weren't worn
so he must not appear to ever be wearing them.
Soles tell a man's occupation, she said.
Worn and hole-filled—labor and walking.
Smooth and speckle-free—leisure, sitting.
The texture of leather would not improve with
dancing or the disgusting habit of tapping toes.
Laces must be tied whether form dictated or not.
Morgan, however, caressed them in his room,
hoping they might satisfy childhood longing:
to slip into something soft and hard,
stealing away from Mother and sitting.

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Leaving Hilton Head Island

He doesn't want anyone to tell him
what color to paint his house nor
how to design it. He grows tired
of green mailboxes. Mother, though,
loves the pastel clothing and bouffant
hairdos on the rich grandmothers,
the proper boy and girl following
behind in clothes they will never
be able to play in. Besides, Morgan's
been lost for a week: first down
Lighthouse Road then Greenwood then
back up Plantation until he's puzzled,
for the villas, their organic greens
and browns (architects' pastime blue-
prints made solid), they give him
no distinct landmarks like a fast-food
strip beyond any American airport.
But when he finally sees the ocean
or the Sound, something stabilizes him
as though it's a former home, somewhere
that the land is truly solid although
the in-and-out, up-and-down of the waves
makes Mother vomit all over herself.

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A Victim of Personality

He knows about the destruction caused by reaction:
emotional wounds, self-inflicted, a repeated torture
he brings about, trying to interrogate the self
for answers, clues to why pain blossoms inside him
like a tumor he feeds cancerous doubts. Mother says
overindulgence in anything sinks the hungry soul.
He knows how dependence forces him to seek nurture
where any milk would evaporate from the intensity
of obsessive heat, that which gives warmth verging
on combustion, exploding into poison not nutrition
with its reasonable proteins and sensible vitamins.
Mother says eating human kindness, the worst medicine.
He knows how valuable and necessary detachment can be:
no one likes barnacles but everyone admires jellyfish
with its ethereal floating, graceful and protean,
alone in the ocean but very much a part of a system.
To be suctioned to another one loses his own shape.
Mother knows; otherwise she would not have divorced.

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Four Poems by Maureen Seaton

Slow Dance

You were egalitarian with the sleaze you perpetrated, loving
transsexual and coed alike, so shy in your approach, no one
suspected your blue eyes. And when you sat barechested,
losing weight before me on the floor of One-Eighty-Eight, I
never doubted you were crazy, not perverted afterall, as
you continued to snap shots of showgirls in angular poses
and hunt all over Ossining for a large man of color to
co-create
with your best friend's wife. Did I miss something our
first date
on Bear Mountain? You knew so much about rattlesnakes
and bats,
your darkness matched my light like sides of a clown suit.
I only gave you to the doctors and the cops because I feared
myself and the damage I seemed to be doing you, sucking
fat from your bones, hair right off your head—no one
deserves such power, wonder child, no matter what you say.
And yes I once slept with someone else while you
were dying.
Remember the night you called me bitch slut whore and said
we'd both be better off dead? Not that night. The next.

Sing Sing

The day Jim stalked the tomcat between rows of bonsai,
I asked: What kind of gun is that? He said: Air.
And snuffed a squirrel as proof or demonstration.
At night we hear the turquoise neon terminator

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frying bugs on the side lawn. Zap, scorch, shrivel and stick.
Lori moans in her sleep at the prolonged executions.
I have nightmares of fireflies betrayed by the mother ship.
Jim calls the female cat "slut" when she falls from grace,
"bitch" when she follows him around the garden.
Everything's beautiful here: gardenias, beefsteaks,
water lilies.
When we first moved in, our electric failed and Jim said
it was nothing but Con Ed's usual overpaid incompetence.
But I imagine little chairs in the cellar wired for pesky pets.
Like living down the street from Sing Sing years back—
how our lights would dim and Grandpa say: There
goes another bum.
And Mom would cross herself, we kids stay angels for days.

Woman Circling Lake

Oh transcendent, this aqua blue and all these health nuts
running back and forth hold nothing—no sea gnome,
no salt to scour your bones clean—only placidity
and motionlessness, no dark fugues or phosphorescence.
It's your turn to stir the waters. Don't
back away from brittle plains and dry wheat saying
you're too far above us for encumbrances. This
is your place, your time: Chicago, end of a millenium.
Your fainthearted sallies fall deep into space, closer
to no one who knows you. See, cloudling, how the
collie pup
chases the gray squirrel up bare sleeping trees. How
old snow banks the blue-green line of Michigan.
The collie is so happy and powerful. The squirrel
steals from ash to oak as if possessed by abandon,
rising higher into sky than any jubilant unchained
creature.
You are the end of winter, sea light. Little star eater,
come back, it's not your turn to die.

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A Flicker of Apocalypse

If the man who called you nigger in Dominick's parking lot
had only dialed 1-800-882-Mary earlier today,
he may have been a better boyscout. I bet
his wife would be patting him right now, saying: Meatloaf?
It seems there's been heavy-duty Jesus activity
on the East Coast lately and His mother is behind it.
I see Him bodysurfing in the Atlantic, sharing parables
of large Northshore families and small sea urchins
with teenagers and sandy toddlers. I wonder where
He's hiding—prefab in Wantagh? Coach house in Old
Westbury?
We'd been supermarket shopping as usual, a little
decaf, a few oranges, and this Christian man of uncertain
origin spits at the parking lot and says the word.
It sounds like "igga" or "neeah", but you get the point,
and you look at him with one of your kiss-of-death looks,
your obeah-in-the-blood-there's-a-knife-in-my-pocket
glower,
and his wife begins to pull on his sleeve like a little girl,
whimpering. And clouds marshal in from the South Side.
And I swear the lights click on at this exact moment.
Every pigeon stands still. Every Toyota. Only the streamers
and banners over Dominick's parking lot rustle in the wind.
I send you my message by archangel—Honey, between us
we could choke this skinny man before the courtesy patrol
arrives to collect his cart. So religion falls shorter.
In reality, his wife dragged him away to a tasteless roast.
And we stood shaking in the light of the all-night
supermarket
until the archangel released Chicago and carried us home.

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Edward Hirsch

Away from Dogma

I was prevented by a sort of shame from going into churches . . . Nevertheless, I had three contacts with Catholicism that really counted.
—Simone Weil

1. In Portugal

One night in Portugal, alone in a forlorn
village at twilight, escaping her parents,
she saw a full moon baptized on the water
and the infallible heavens stained with clouds.

Vespers at eventide. A ragged procession
of fishermen's wives moving down to the sea,
carrying candles onto the boats, and singing
hymns of heartrending sadness. She thought:

this world is a smudged blue village
at sundown, the happenstance of stumbling
into the sixth canonical hour, discovering
the tawny sails of evening, the afflicted

religion of slaves. She thought: I am
one of those slaves, but I will not kneel
before Him, at least not now, not with
these tormented limbs that torment me still.

God is not manifest in this dusky light
and humiliated flesh: He is not among us.
But still the faith of the fishermen's wives
lifted her toward them, and she thought:

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this life is a grave, mysterious moment
of hearing voices by the water and seeing
olive trees stretching out in the dirt,
of accepting the heavens cracked with rain.

2. In Assisi

To stand on the parcel of land where the saint
knelt down and married Lady Poverty, to walk
through the grasses of the Umbrian hills
where he scolded wolves and preached

to doves and jackdaws, where he chanted
canticles to the creatures who share our earth,
praising Brother Sun who rules the day,
Sister Moon who brightens the night.

Brother Fire sleeps in the arms of Sister Water.
Brother Wind kisses Sister Earth so tenderly.
To carry a picnic and eat whatever he ate—
bread and wine, the fare of tourists and saints.

She disliked the Miracles in the Gospels.
She never believed in the mystery of contact,
here below, between a human being and God.
She despised popular tales of apparitions.

But that afternoon in Assisi she wandered
through the abominable Santa Maria degli Angeli
and happened upon a little marvel of Romanesque
purity where St. Francis liked to pray.

She was there a short time when something absolute
and omniverous, something she neither believed
nor disbelieved, something she understood—
but what was it?—forced her to her knees.

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3. At Solesmes

From Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday,
from Matins to Vespers and beyond, from
each earthly sound that hammered her skull
and entered her bloodstream, from the headaches

she sent into the universe and took back
into her flesh, from the suffering body
to the suffering mind, from the unholy breath
to the memories that never forgot her—

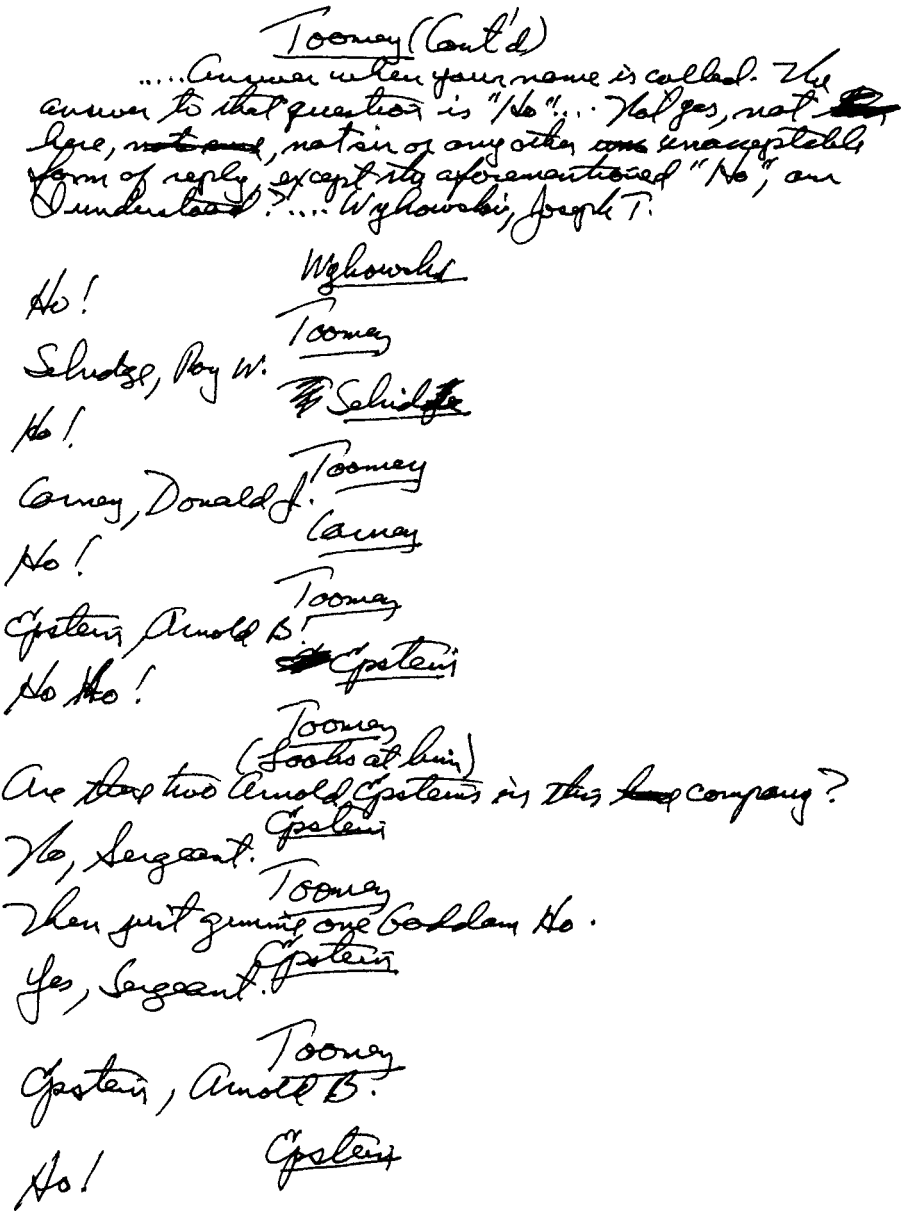
the factory whistle and the branding-iron
of the masters, the sixty-hour work week
and the machine that belched into her face,
the burns that blossomed on her arms—

from whatever weighs us down to whatever
lifts us up, from whatever mutilates us
to whatever spirits us away, from soul
descending to soul arising, moment by moment

she felt the body heaped up and abandoned
in the corner, the skin tasted and devoured;
she felt an invisible hand wavering
over the rags she was leaving behind.

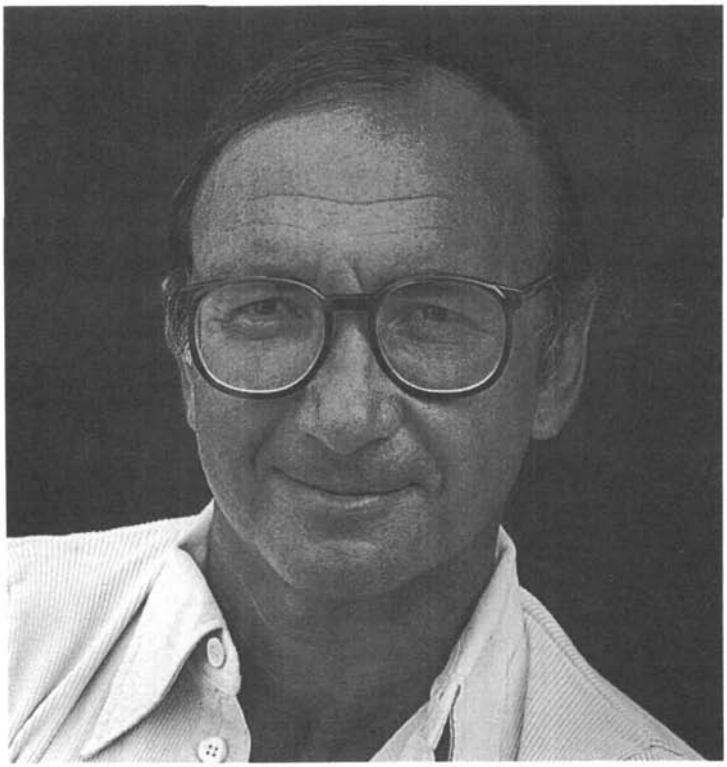
Between the voices chanting and her own recitation,
between the heartbeats transfigured to prayer,
between the word *forsaken* and the word *joy,*
God came down and possessed her.

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A manuscript page from Biloxi Blues *by Neil Simon.*

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Neil Simon

The Art of Theater X

Legend has it that on his deathbed the actor Edmund Gwenn answered director John Ford's "What is dying like?" with a reflective, "Dying is easy. Comedy *is hard."*

By any measure—quantity, quality, popular success, renown—Neil Simon is the preeminent purveyor of comedy in the last half of the twentieth century. Like the work of most writers of comedy, from Aristophanes to Woody Allen, Simon's humor is written to be spoken. And heard. For Simon the art of humor is both communal (each member of the audience in league with all the other members of the audience) and collegial (playwright

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and performers in league with the audience—a relationship Simon will describe as a "shared secret"). Fielding, Twain and Thurber can be savored in one's lap, but verbal, visual humor, like misery, loves company. Simon is not only skillful at his craft but prolific as well. He is the author of more than twenty plays, including Come Blow Your Horn, Barefoot in the Park, The Odd Couple, *the Brighton Beach trilogy,* Prisoner of Second Avenue, Plaza Suite *and* Lost in Yonkers.

These pages are the winnowing of sixteen hours of taped conversation in Simon's office on the second floor of a Spanish colonial apartment building in the Beverly Hills flats—several miles, a thousand vertical feet and a dozen social strata below the Bel Air hilltop home Simon shares with his wife Diane and their daughter Bryn.

The writer's no-nonsense work space, impersonal in its laid-back Southern Californian setting, is conspicuously empty (no secretary, no phone calls, no distractions) but intensely personal in the memorabilia that have, as Simon explains, "sort of gravitated" there over the years.

Halfway through the tour of the apartment Simon stopped abruptly and remarked, in apparent surprise, on how many of the room's furnishings date from the house on Manhattan's East Sixty-second Street where he lived with his first wife, Joan: chairs, tables, photographs, paintings—some painted by Joan, a framed letter from her, written in cryptic, Joycean prose and signed, "Klarn." The baseball paraphernalia on display reflects another side of Simon's life. His substantial collection of antique caps and autographed balls, with a recent emphasis on Bobby Bonilla, would knock the knee-socks off the playwright's baseball-mad alter ego, Eugene Jerome.

There are the usual theatrical souvenirs and a few unusual ones: a telegram from the president of Columbia University informing Simon of his Pulitzer Prize for Lost in Yonkers, *a Neil Simon* Time *magazine cover, a poster from the Moscow production of* Biloxi Blues, *signed by the cast, "Dear Neil Simon, We love you and your plays. We had worked on this performance with enjoy."*

"Doc" Simon, so called from his childhood habit of mimick-

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ing the family doctor, is tall and fit, despite the chronic back problems that have curtailed his tennis playing in recent years. We sat at a massive, polished tree-stump coffee table covered with the tools of his trade: pens neatly stacked (by the cleaning woman, he hastened to say), scripts, finished and unfinished, books and the long pads on which he writes. We laughed frequently as we discussed his plays, opinions and past. Even when the talk turned as serious as some of his recent scripts, the face that peered over the tree stump like a Bronx leprechaun bore two indelible Simon trademarks: the eyes of an insatiably curious and slightly guarded child, shielded by horn-rimmed glasses, and a faint, constant, enigmatic smile. Take a look at the accompanying photograph. What is this man smiling at? Perhaps the shared secret.

INTERVIEWER

Lillian Hellman once said she always began work on a play with something very small—a scene, or even two vague lines of dialogue whose meaning was utterly unknown to her. What starts *you,* what makes you think there's a play there?

NEIL SIMON

As many plays as I've written—twenty-seven, twenty-eight—I can't recollect a moment when I've said "This would make a good play." I never sit down and write bits and pieces of dialogue. What I might do is make a few notes on who's in the play, the characters I want, where it takes place and the general idea of it. I don't make any outlines at all. I just like to plunge in. I'll start right from page one because I want to hear how the people speak. Are they interesting enough for me? Have I captured them? It goes piece by piece, brick by brick. I don't know that I have a play until I've reached thirty, thirty-five pages.

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INTERVIEWER

Have you ever started thematically?

SIMON

I *think* about thematic plays, but I don't believe I write them. Nothing really takes shape until I become specific about the character and the dilemma he's in. *Dilemma* is the key word. It is always a dilemma, not a situation. To tell the truth, I really don't know what the theme of the play is until I've written it and the critics tell me.

INTERVIEWER

Every playwright, every director, every actor, speaks about conflict. We're all supposed to be in the conflict business. When you speak of dilemma, are you talking about conflict?

SIMON

Yes. In *Broadway Bound* I wanted to show the anatomy of writing comedy—with the older brother teaching Eugene, which was the case with my brother Danny and me. Stan keeps asking Eugene for the essential ingredient in comedy, and when Eugene can't answer, Stan says, "Conflict!" When he asks for the *other* key ingredient, and Eugene can only come up with, "*More* conflict?" Stan says, "The key word is *wants.* In every comedy, even drama, somebody has to want something and want it bad. When somebody tries to stop him—that's conflict." By the time you know the conflicts, the play is already written in your mind. All you have to do is put the words down. You don't have to outline the play, it outlines itself. You go by sequential activity. One thing follows the other. But it all starts with that first seed, conflict. As Stan says, it's got to be a very, very strong conflict, not one that allows the characters to say, "Forget about this! I'm walking out." They've got to stay there and fight it out to the end.

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INTERVIEWER

You said that it isn't until you get to page thirty-five that you know whether or not you've got a play. Are there times when you get to page thirty-five and decide the conflict isn't strong enough, and the play disappears to languish forever in a drawer?

SIMON

I've got infinitely more plays in the drawer than have seen the lights of the stage. Most of them never come out of the drawer, but occasionally one will, and it amazes me how long it has taken to germinate and blossom. The best example would be *Brighton Beach Memoirs.* I wrote the first thirty-five pages of the play and gave it to my children, Nancy and Ellen, and Marsha, my wife at the time. They read it and said, "This is incredible. You've got to go on with it." I showed it to my producer, Manny Azenberg, and to Gordon Davidson, and they said, "This is going to be a great play." I knew the play was a turn in style for me, probing more deeply into myself, but maybe the pressure of the words "great play" scared me, so I put it away. Periodically, I would take it out and read it, and I wouldn't know how to do it. After nine years I took it out one day, read the thirty-five pages, picked up my pen and the pad I write on and finished the play in six weeks. I have the feeling that in the back of your mind there's a little writer who writes while you're doing other things, because I had no trouble at that point. Obviously, what had happened in the ensuing years in my life made clear to me what it should be about. Somewhere in the back of my head I grew up, I matured. I was ready to write that play. Sometimes it *helps* to have some encouragement. Once I was having dinner with Mike Nichols, and he asked, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm working on a play about two ex-vaudevillians who haven't worked together or seen each other in eleven years, and they get together to do an Ed Sullivan Show." He said, "That sounds wonderful. Go back and finish it."

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So I did. It was as though a critic had already seen the play and said, "I love it." But there are many, many plays that get to a certain point and no further. For years I've been trying to write the play of what happened to me and the seven writers who wrote Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows." But I've never got past page twenty-two because there are seven conflicts rather than one main conflict. I've been writing more subtext and more subplot lately—but in this situation *everybody* was funny. I didn't have somebody to be serious, to anchor it. I always have to find the anchor. I have to find the Greek chorus in the play, the character who either literally talks to the audience or talks to the audience in a sense. For example, Oscar in *The Odd Couple* is the Greek chorus. He watches, he perceives how Felix behaves, and he comments on it. Felix then comments back on what Oscar is, but Oscar is the one who is telling us what the play is about. More recently, in the Brighton Beach trilogy, I've been *literally* talking to the audience, through the character of Eugene, because it is the only way I can express the writer's viewpoint. The writer has inner thoughts, and they are not always articulated on the stage—and I want the audience to be able to get inside his head. It's what I did in *Jake's Women.* In the first try out in San Diego the audience didn't know enough about Jake because all he did was react to the women in his life, who were badgering him, trying to get him to open up. We didn't know who Jake was. So I introduced the device of him talking to the audience. Then he became the fullest, richest character in the play, because the audience knew things I never thought I would reveal about Jake—and possibly about myself.

INTERVIEWER

Will you return to the "Show of Shows" play?

SIMON

I do very often think about doing it. What was unique about that experience was that almost every one of the

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writers has gone on to do really major things: Mel Brooks's whole career . . . Larry Gelbart . . . Woody Allen . . . Joe Stein who wrote *Fiddler on the Roof* . . . Michael Stewart who wrote *Hello, Dolly* . . . it was a group of people only Sid Caesar knew how to put together. Maybe it was trial and error because the ones who didn't work fell out, but once we worked together it was the most excruciatingly hilarious time in my life. It was also one of the most painful because you were fighting for recognition, and there was no recognition. It was very difficult for me because I was quiet and shy, so I sat next to Carl Reiner and whispered my jokes to him. He was my spokesman, he'd jump up and say, "He's got it! He's got it!" Then Carl would say the line, and I would hear it, and I'd laugh because I thought it was funny. But when I watched the show on a Saturday night with my wife, Joan, she'd say, "That was your line, wasn't it?" and I'd say, "I don't remember." What I *do* remember is the screaming and fighting—a cocktail party without the cocktails, everyone yelling lines in and out, people getting very angry at others who were slacking off. Mel Brooks was the main culprit. We all came in to work at ten o'clock in the morning, but he showed up at one o'clock. We'd say, "That's it. We're sick and tired of this. Either Mel comes in at ten o'clock or we go to Sid and do something about it." At about ten to one, Mel would come in with a straw hat, fling it across the room and say "Lindy made it!" and everyone would fall down hysterical. He didn't need the eight hours we put in. He needed four hours. He is, maybe, the most uniquely funny man I've ever met. That inspired me. I wanted to be around those people. I've fooled around with this idea for a play. I even found a title for it, *Laughter on the Twenty-third Floor,* because I think the office was on the twenty-third floor. From that building we looked down on Bendel's and Bergdorf Goodman and Fifth Avenue, watching all the pretty girls go by through binoculars. Sometimes we'd set fire to the desk with lighter fluid. We should have been arrested, all of us.

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INTERVIEWER

If you ever get past page twenty-two, how would you deal with Mel and Woody and the others? Would they appear as themselves?

SIMON

No, no, no! They'd all be fictitious. It would be like the Brighton Beach trilogy, which is semi-autobiographical.

INTERVIEWER

It feels totally autobiographical. I assumed it was.

SIMON

Everyone does. But I've told interviewers that if I meant it to be autobiographical I would have called the character Neil Simon. He's not Neil. He's Eugene Jerome. That gives you greater latitude for fiction. It's like doing abstract painting. You see your own truth in it, but the abstraction is the art.

INTERVIEWER

When did you realize there was a sequel to *Brighton Beach Memoirs?*

SIMON

It got a middling review from Frank Rich of *The New York Times,* but he said at the end of it, "One hopes that there is a chapter two to *Brighton Beach."* I thought, he's asking for a sequel to a play that he doesn't seem to like!

INTERVIEWER

Are you saying Frank Rich persuaded you to write *Biloxi Blues?*

SIMON

No, but I listened to him saying, "I'm interested enough to want to know more about this family." Then, Steven Spielberg, who had gone to see *Brighton Beach,*

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got word to me, suggesting the next play should be about my days in the army. I was already thinking about that, and I started to write *Biloxi Blues,* which became a play about Eugene's rites of passage. I discovered something very important in the writing of *Biloxi Blues.* Eugene, who keeps a diary, writes in it his belief that Epstein is homosexual. When the other boys in the barracks read the diary and assume it's true, Eugene feels terrible guilt. He's realized the responsibility of putting something down on paper, because people tend to believe everything they read.

INTERVIEWER

The Counterfeiters ends with the diary André Gide kept while he was writing the book, and in it he says he knows he's writing well when the dialectic of the scene takes over, and the characters seize the scene from him, and he's become not a writer but a *reader.* Do you sometimes find that your characters have taken the play away from you and are off in their own direction?

SIMON

I've *always* felt like a middleman, like the typist. Somebody somewhere else is saying, "This is what they say now. This is what they say next." Very often it is the characters themselves, once they become clearly defined. When I was working on my first play, *Come Blow Your Horn,* I was told by fellow writers that you must outline your play, you must know where you're going. I wrote a complete, detailed outline from page one to the end of the play. In the writing of the play, I didn't get past page fifteen when the characters started to move away from the outline. I tried to pull them back in, saying, "Get back in there. This is where you belong. I've already diagrammed your life." They said, "No, no, no. This is where I want to go." So, I started following them. In the second play, *Barefoot in the Park,* I outlined the first two acts. I said, "I'll leave the third act a free-for-all, so I can

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go where I want." I never got through that outline either. In *The Odd Couple,* I outlined the first act. After a while I got tired of doing even that. I said, "I want to be as surprised as anyone else." I had also read a book on playwriting by John van Druten, in which he said, "Don't outline your play, because then the rest of it will just be work. It should be joy. You should be discovering things the way the audience discovers them." So, I stopped doing it.

INTERVIEWER

Gide writes about being surprised by the material coming up on the typewriter. He finds himself laughing, shocked, sometimes dismayed . . .

SIMON

Sometimes I start laughing—and I've had moments in this office when I've burst into tears. Not that I thought the audience might do that. The moment had triggered a memory or a feeling that was deeply hidden. That's catharsis. It's one of the main reasons I write the plays. It's like analysis without going to the analyst. The play becomes your analysis. The writing of the play is the most enjoyable part of it. It's also the most frightening part because you walk into a forest without a knife, without a compass. But if your instincts are good, if you have a sense of geography, you find that you're clearing a path and getting to the right place. If the miracle happens, you come out at the very place you *wanted* to. But very often you have to go back to the beginning of the forest and start walking through it again, saying, "I went that way. It was a dead end." You cross out, cross over. You meet new friends along the way, people you never thought you'd meet. It takes you into a world you hadn't planned on going to when you started the play. The play may have started out to be a comedy, and suddenly you get into a place of such depth that it surprises you. As one critic aptly said, I wrote *Brighton Beach Memoirs* about the

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family I *wished* I'd had instead of the family I *did* have. It's closer to *Ah, Wilderness* than my reality.

INTERVIEWER

When did you realize that *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *Biloxi Blues* were part of a trilogy?

SIMON

I thought it seemed odd to leave the Eugene saga finished after two plays. Three is a trilogy—I don't even know what two plays are called. So, I decided to write the third one, and the idea came immediately. It was back to the war theme again, only these were domestic wars. The boys were having guilts and doubts about leaving home for a career writing comedy. Against this played the war between the parents. I also brought in the character of the socialist grandfather who was constantly telling the boys, "You can't just write jokes and make people laugh." Against this came Blanche from the first play, *Brighton Beach,* trying to get the grandfather to move to Florida to take care of his aging, ill wife. To me, setting people in conflict with each other is like what those Chinese jugglers do, spinning one plate, then another, then another. I wanted to keep as many plates spinning as I could.

INTERVIEWER

What exactly do you mean when you call the Brighton Beach trilogy semi-autobiographical?

SIMON

It means the play may be based on incidents that happened in my life—but they're not written the way they happened. *Broadway Bound* comes closest to being really autobiographical. I didn't pull any punches with that one. My mother and father were gone when I wrote it, so I did tell about the fights, and what it was like for me as a kid hearing them. I didn't realize until someone said

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after the first reading that the play was really a love letter to my mother! She suffered the most in all of it. She was the one that was left alone. Her waxing that table didn't exist in life, but it exists symbolically for *me.* It's the abstraction I was talking about.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of abstraction, there's something mystifying to audiences—and other writers—about what the great comedy writers do. From outside, it seems to be as different from what most writers are able to do as baseball is from ballet. I'm not going to ask anything quite as fatuous as "What is humor?" but I *am* asking—is it genetic, is it a mind-set, a quirk? And, most important, can it be learned—or, for that matter, taught?

SIMON

The answer is complex. First of all, there are various styles and attitudes towards comedy. When I worked on "Your Show of Shows," Larry Gelbart was the wittiest, cleverest man I'd ever met, Mel Brooks the most outrageous. I never knew what I was. I *still* don't know. Maybe I had the best sense of construction of the group. I only know some aspects of my humor, one of which involves being completely literal. To give you an example, in *Lost in Yonkers,* Uncle Louie is trying to explain the heartless grandmother to Arty. "When she was twelve years old, her old man takes her to a political rally in Berlin. A horse goes down and crushes Ma's foot. Nobody ever fixed it. It hurts every day of her life, but I never once seen her take even an aspirin." Later, Arty says to his older brother, "I'm afraid of her, Jay. A horse fell on her when she was a kid, and she hasn't taken an aspirin yet." It's an almost exact repetition of what Louie told him and this time it gets a huge laugh. That mystifies me. In *Prisoner of Second Avenue,* you knew there were terrible things tormenting Peter Falk. He sat down on a sofa that had stacks of pillows, like every sofa in the world, and he

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took one pillow after the other and started throwing them angrily saying, "You pay $800 for a sofa, and you can't sit on it because you got ugly little pillows shoved up your back!" There is no joke there. Yet, it was an enormous laugh—because the audience identified. That, more or less, is what is funny to me: saying something that's instantly identifiable to everybody. People come up to you after the show and say, "I've always thought that, but I never knew anyone *else* thought it." It's a shared secret between you and the audience.

INTERVIEWER

You've often said that you've never consciously written a joke in one of your plays.

SIMON

I try never to think of jokes as jokes. I confess that in the early days, when I came from television, plays like *Come Blow Your Horn* would have lines you could lift out that would be funny in themselves. That to me would be a "joke," which I would try to remove. In *The Odd Couple* Oscar had a line about Felix, "He's so panicky he wears his seatbelt at a drive-in movie." That could be a Bob Hope joke. I left it in because I couldn't find anything to replace it.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever found that a producer, director or actor objected to losing a huge laugh that you were determined to cut from the play?

SIMON

An actor, perhaps, yes. They'll say, "But that's my big laugh." I say, "But it hurts the scene." It's very hard to convince them. Walter Matthau was after me constantly on *The Odd Couple,* complaining not about one of his lines, but one of Art Carney's. He'd say, "It's not a good line." A few days later, I received a letter from a doctor

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in Wilmington. It said, "Dear Mr. Simon, I loved your play, but I find one line really objectionable. I wish you would take it out." So, I took the line out and said, "Walter, I've complied with your wishes. I got a letter from a prominent doctor in Wilmington who didn't like the line . . ." He started to laugh, and then I realized, "You son of a bitch, *you're* the doctor!" And he was. Those quick lines, the one-liners attributed to me for so many years—*I* think they come purely out of character, rather than out of a joke. Walter Kerr once came to my aid by saying, "to be or not to be" is a one-liner. If it's a dramatic moment no one calls it a one-liner. If it gets a laugh, suddenly it's a one-liner. I think one of the complaints of critics is that the people in my plays are funnier than they would be in life, but have you ever seen *Medea?* The characters are a lot more dramatic in that than they are in life.

INTERVIEWER

You've also said that when you began writing for the theater you decided to try to write comedy the way dramatists write plays—writing from the characters out, internally, psychologically . . .

SIMON

Yes. What I try to do is make dialogue come purely out of character, so that one character could never say the lines that belong to another character. If it's funny, it's because I'm telling a story about characters in whom I may find a rich vein of humor. When I started writing plays I was warned by people like Lillian Hellman, "You do not mix comedy with drama." But my theory was, if it's mixed in life, why can't you do it in a play? The very first person I showed *Come Blow Your Horn* to was Herman Shumlin, the director of Hellman's *The Little Foxes.* He said, "I like the play, I like the people, but I don't like the older brother." I said, "What's wrong with him?" He said, "Well, it's a comedy. We have to like everybody." I said,

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"In *life* do we have to like everybody?" In the most painful scene in *Lost in Yonkers,* Bella, who is semi-retarded, is trying to tell the family that the boy she wants to marry is also retarded. It's a poignant situation, and yet the information that slowly comes out—and the way the family is third-degreeing her—becomes hilarious, because it's mixed with someone else's pain. I find that what is most poignant is often most funny.

INTERVIEWER

In the roll-call scene in *Biloxi Blues* you riff for several pages on one word, one *syllable:* "Ho." It builds and builds in what I've heard you call a "run."

SIMON

I learned from watching Chaplin films that what's most funny isn't a single moment of laughter but the moments that come on top of it, and on top of *those.* I learned it from the Laurel and Hardy films too. One of the funniest things I ever saw Laurel and Hardy do was try to undress in the upper berth of a train—together. It took ten minutes, getting the arms in the wrong sleeves and their feet caught in the net, one terrible moment leading to another. I thought, there could be no greater satisfaction for me than to do that to an audience. Maybe "Ho" also came from sitting in the dark as a kid, listening to Jack Benny's running gags on the radio. In *Barefoot in the Park,* when the telephone man comes up five or six flights of stairs, he arrives completely out of breath. When Paul makes *his* entrance, *he's* completely out of breath. When the mother makes her entrance, *she's* completely out of breath. Some critics have written, "You milk that out-of-breath joke too much." My answer is, "You mean because it's happened three times, when they come up the fourth time they shouldn't be out of breath anymore?" It's *not* a joke, it's the natural thing. Like "Ho." Those boys are petrified on their first day in the army, confronted by this maniac sergeant.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you pace the lines so the laughs don't cover the dialogue or is that the director's job? Do you try to set up a rhythm in the writing that will allow for the audience's response?

SIMON

You don't know where the laughs are until you get in front of an audience. Most of the biggest laughs I've ever had I never knew were big laughs. Mike Nichols used to say to me, "Take out all the little laughs because they hurt the big ones." Sometimes the little laughs aren't even *meant* to be laughs. I mean them to further the play, the plot, the character, the story. They're written unwittingly . . . strange word to pick. I cut them, and the laugh pops up somewhere else.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first realize you were funny?

SIMON

It started very early in my life—eight, nine, ten years old—being funny around the other kids. You single out one kid on your block or in the school who understands what you're saying. He's the only one who laughs. The other kids only laugh when someone tells them a joke: "Two guys got on a truck . . . " I've never done that in my life. I don't like telling jokes. I don't like to hear someone say to me, "Tell him that funny thing you said the other day." It's repeating it. I have no more joy in it. Once it's said, for me it's over. The same is true once it's written—I have no more interest in it. I've expelled whatever it is I needed to exorcise, whether it's humorous or painful. Generally, painful. Maybe the humor is to cover the pain up, or maybe it's a way to share the experience with someone.

INTERVIEWER

Has psychoanalysis influenced your work?

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SIMON

Yes. Generally I've gone into analysis when my life was in turmoil. But I found after a while I was going when it *wasn't* in turmoil. I was going to get a college education in human behavior. I was talking not only about myself; I was trying to understand my wife, my brother, my children, my family, anybody—including the analyst. I can't put everything in the plays down to pure chance. I want them to reveal what makes people tick. I tend to analyze almost everything. I don't think it started because I went through analysis. I'm just naturally that curious. The good mechanic knows how to take a car apart; I love to take the human mind apart and see how it works. Behavior is absolutely the most interesting thing I can write about. You put that behavior in conflict, and you're in business.

INTERVIEWER

Would you describe your writing process? Since you don't use an outline, do you ever know how a play will end?

SIMON

Sometimes I think I do—but it doesn't mean that's how the play *will* end. Very often you find that you've written past the end, and you say, "Wait a minute, it ended *here.*" When I started to write *Plaza Suite* it was going to be a full three-act play. The first act was about a wife who rents the same suite she and her husband honeymooned in at the Plaza Hotel twenty-three years ago. In the course of the act the wife finds out that the husband is having an affair with his secretary, and at the end of the act the husband walks out the door as champagne and hors d'oeuvres arrive. The waiter asks, "Is he coming back?" and the wife says, "Funny you should ask that." I wrote that and said to myself, "That's the end of the play, I don't want to *know* if he's coming back." That's what made me write three one-act plays for *Plaza Suite.* I don't *like* to know where the

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play is going to end. I purposely won't think of the ending because I'm afraid, if I know, even subliminally, it'll sneak into the script, and the audience will know where the play is going. As a matter of fact, I never know where the play is going in the *second act.* When *Broadway Bound* was completed, I listened to the first reading and thought, there's not a moment in this entire play where I see the mother happy. She's a miserable woman. I want to know *why* she's miserable. The answer was planted in the beginning of the play: the mother kept talking about how no one believed she once danced with George Raft. I thought, the boy should ask her to talk about George Raft, and as she does, she'll reveal everything in her past.

INTERVIEWER

The scene ends with the now-famous moment of the boy dancing with the mother the way Raft did—*if* he did.

SIMON

Yes. People have said, "It's so organic, you had to have known you were writing to that all the time." But I *didn't* know it when I sat down to write the play. I had an interesting problem when I was writing *Rumors.* I started off with just a basic premise: I wanted to do an elegant farce. I wrote it right up to the last two pages of the play, the denouement in which everything has to be explained—and I didn't know what it was! I said to myself, "Today's the day I have to write the explanation. All right, just think it out." I *couldn't* think it out. So I said, "Well then, go sentence by sentence." I couldn't write it sentence by sentence. I said, "Go word by word. The man sits down and tells the police the story. He starts off with, 'It was six o'clock.' " That much I could write. I kept going until everything made sense. That method takes either insanity or egocentricity—or a great deal of confidence. It's like building a bridge over water without knowing if there's land on the other

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side. But I do have confidence that when I get to the end of the play, I will have gotten so deeply into the characters and the situation I'll find the resolution.

INTERVIEWER

So you never write backwards from a climactic event to the incidents and scenes at the beginning of the play that will take you to it?

SIMON

Never. The linkages are done by instinct. Sometimes I'll write something and say, "Right now this doesn't mean very much, but I have a hunch that later on in the play it will mean something." The thing I always do is play back on things I set up without any intention in the beginning. The foundation of the play is set in those first fifteen or twenty minutes. Whenever I get in trouble in the second act, I go back to the first act. The answers always lie there. One of the lines people have most often accused me of working backwards from is Felix Ungar's note to Oscar in *The Odd Couple.* In the second act, Oscar has reeled off the laundry list of complaints he has about Felix, including "the little letters you leave me." Now, when Felix is leaving one of those notes, telling Oscar they're all out of cornflakes, I said to myself, "How would he sign it? I know he'd do something that would annoy Oscar." So I signed it "Mr. Ungar." Then I tried "Felix Ungar." Then I tried "F.U." and it was as if a bomb had exploded in the room. When Oscar says, "It took me three hours to figure out that F.U. was Felix Ungar," it always gets this huge laugh.

INTERVIEWER

Felix Unger also appears in *Come Blow Your Horn.* I wanted to ask why you used the name twice.

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SIMON

This will give you an indication of how little I thought my career would amount to. I thought *The Odd Couple* would probably be the end of my career, so it wouldn't make any difference that I had used Felix Ungar in *Come Blow Your Horn.* It was a name that seemed to denote the prissiness of Felix, the perfect contrast to the name of Oscar. Oscar may not sound like a strong name, but it did to me—maybe because of the *K* sound in it.

INTERVIEWER

So you subscribe to the *K*-theory expressed by the comedians in *The Sunshine Boys—K* is funny.

SIMON

Oh, I do. Not only that, *K* cuts through the theater. You say a *K*-word, and they can hear it.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about the mechanics of writing, starting with where you write.

SIMON

I have this office. There are four or five rooms in it, and no one is here but me. No secretary, no one, and I've never once in the many years that I've come here ever felt lonely, or even alone. I come in and the room is filled with—as corny as it might sound—these characters I'm writing, who are waiting each day for me to arrive and give them life. I've also written on airplanes, in dentist's offices, on subways. I think it's true for many writers. You blank out whatever is in front of your eyes. That's why you see writers staring off into space. They're not looking at "nothing," they're visualizing what they're thinking. I never visualize what a play will look like on stage, I visualize what it looks like in *life.* I visualize being in that room where the mother is confronting the father.

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INTERVIEWER

What tools do you use? Do you use a 1928 Underwood the way real writers are supposed to? Or a computer? You mentioned using a pad and pencil . . .

SIMON

I wrote my early plays at the typewriter because it was what writers looked like in *His Girl Friday.*

INTERVIEWER

Lots of crumpled pages being flung across the room?

SIMON

Yes. But my back started to get so bad from bending over a typewriter eight hours a day, five or six days a week that I couldn't do it anymore, so I started to write in pads. Then a curious thing happened. I was in England and found that they have pads over there with longer pages and thinner spaces between the lines. I liked that because I could get much more on a single page. At a single glance I could see the rhythm of the speeches. If they're on a smaller page with wide spaces you don't get a sense of the rhythm. You have to keep turning. So, I write in these pads. Sometimes I write on both sides of the page, but I always leave myself lots of room to make notes and cross things out. I'll write about three pages, then go to the typewriter and type that out. Then the next day I'll read those three pages again and maybe not like them, and go back to the notebook—write it out, make changes, and then retype it. The typing is boring for me, but I can't use a word processor. It feels inhuman. It seems to me that every script comes out of a computer looking like it was written by the same person. My typewriter has its own characteristics, its own little foibles. Even there, I black out parts and write marginal notes. I'd like it to be neat, but I don't like to send it to a professional typist because they invariably correct my purposely made grammatical

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errors. I try to write the way people speak, not the way people *should* speak.

INTERVIEWER

When you're writing dialogue, do you write it silently or speak it aloud?

SIMON

I never *thought* I spoke the lines until my family told me I did. They said they could walk by and tell if it was going well or not by the rhythm of it. I guess I want to see if I'm repeating words, and, because I write primarily for the stage, I want to make sure the words won't be tripping badly over some tongues.

INTERVIEWER

Do you play the parts, I mean, *really* play them and get into them?

SIMON

Yes. When I wrote the Sergeant Bilko show my father asked me naively, "Do you just write Sergeant Bilko's lines or do you write the other lines too?" When you write a play, maybe even a novel, you become *everybody.* It may seem like I only write the lines spoken by the character who is like Neil Simon, but, in *Lost in Yonkers,* I'm also the grandmother—and Bella. And to do that you have to *become* that person. That's the adventure, the joy, the release that allows you to escape from your own boundaries. To be Grandma every other line for a couple of pages takes you into another being. It's interesting how many people ask, "Was this your grandmother?" I say, "No, I didn't have a grandmother like that," and they say, "Then how do you know her?" I know what she *sounds* like. I know what she *feels* like. The boys describe it when they say, "When you kiss her it's like kissing a cold prune." I describe her in a stage direction as being a very tall, buxom woman. But she doesn't necessarily

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have to be tall and buxom. She just has to appear that way to the boys. You can't really use that as physical description, but it will convey something to the actress.

INTERVIEWER

And to the actors playing the two boys.

SIMON

Yes. Those directions are very important.

INTERVIEWER

Family seems to be more than a predilection or interest, it is a near obsession with you. Even if you're writing about a couple, in comes an extended family of friends or the blood-related aunts, uncles, cousins, fathers and mothers with which your plays abound. Is that because family has played such an important role, for good and ill, in your life?

SIMON

Well, for one thing, it's a universal subject. For example, when *Come Blow Your Horn* was playing, the theater doorman, a black man in his sixties, was standing in the back of the theater, laughing his head off. I went over to him after the play and asked, "Why were you laughing so much?" He said, "That's my family up there." I don't write social and political plays, because I've always thought the family was the microcosm of what goes on in the world. I write about the small wars that eventually become the big wars. It's also what I'm most comfortable with. I am a middle-class person, I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood. I try now and then to get away from the family play, but it amazes me that I've spent the last thirty-one years writing plays primarily about either my family or families very close to it. Maybe the answer is that at some point along the way you discover what it is you do best, and writing about the family unit and its extensions is what I do best.

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INTERVIEWER

Your introduction to the first published collection of your work is called "The Writer as Schizophrenic." The word *observer* comes up repeatedly in your conversation, your interviews and, especially, in your plays. Have you always seen yourself as an outsider, an observer?

SIMON

Yes, that started very early, when my parents would take me to visit family. They'd offer me a cookie or a piece of fruit, but no one *spoke* to me, because they knew I had nothing to contribute. I wasn't offended. I just thought it was the accepted norm. And that led me to believe that I was somehow invisible. On radio shows like "The Shadow," there *were* invisible people. And movies were coming out—"The Invisible Man," with Claude Rains. To me, invisible seemed the greatest thing you could be! If I could have one wish, it was to be invisible. First of all, you could go to any baseball game you wanted to. Free. You could go into any girl's house and watch her get undressed! But it works another way too. It means there's no responsibility. You don't have to integrate, to contribute. This becomes a part of your personality.

INTERVIEWER

Does that detachment apply to your personal relationships as pervasively as to your work?

SIMON

I'm not quite sure who I am besides the writer. The writer is expressive, the other person can sit in a room and listen and not say anything. It's very hard for me to get those two people together. In the middle of a conversation or a confrontation, I can suddenly step outside it. It's like Jekyll turning into Mr. Hyde without the necessity of taking the potion. It's why the Eugene character speaks to the audience in the trilogy: because, in a sense,

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he is invisible. The other characters in the play don't see him talking to the audience. They go right about their business. As I wrote it, I thought: I'm now living my perfect dream—to be invisible.

INTERVIEWER

In *Barefoot in the Park,* Corie says, "Do you know what you are? You're a watcher. There are watchers in the world, and there are doers, and the watchers sit around watching the doers do."

SIMON

In all three of my marriages I've been accused of this separation. "You're not listening to me. You're not looking at me." When you asked about where I write, I said anywhere. I just stare into space. That's happened when I was talking to my wife. I could be looking at her and not thinking about what she's saying. It's rude. It's selfish, I guess. But it's what happens; some other thought has taken its place. One of the worst and most frightening examples of that was the first time I was ever on television. I went on the Johnny Carson show. I was standing behind that curtain, hearing them give my credits. Then they said, "And here he is, the prolific playwright, Neil Simon." I walked out and froze. I thought, my God, I'm out here, I've got to deliver something, I've got to be humorous, that's what they expect of me. I sat down opposite Johnny Carson, and he asked his first question, which was fairly lengthy. After the first two words I heard *nothing.* I only saw his lips moving. I said to myself, "I've got all this time not to do anything. In other words, while his lips are moving I'm all right." So, my mind just wandered. I was looking around, saying, "Well, forty million people are watching me, I wonder if my brother's going to watch this, what's he going to think of it?" When Johnny's lips stopped, I was on. But I had no answer because I'd never heard the question. So, I said something like, "That reminds me of some-

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thing Johnny," and went into something completely irrelevant that fortunately was funny, and we just seemed to move on with the conversation. It happens while I'm speaking to students at a college or university. I'll be talking. I'll look over the room and see one face not interested, and I'm gone, I'm lost. I wish I were out there, sitting among the invisible, but I'm up there having to deliver. The demands of coming up with something every minute are very difficult. In a sense, being in this office, I am invisible because I can stop. When I'm writing, there's no pressure to come up with the next line. I always need that escape hatch, that place to go that's within myself. I've tried coming to terms with it. I feel, as long as it doesn't bother someone else, I'm happy with it. When it *does* bother someone else, then I'm in trouble.

INTERVIEWER

And your characters share this watcher/doer problem?

SIMON

Felix in *The Odd Couple* isn't a watcher—or a doer. He's stuck. He's reached a certain point in his life and developed no further. *Most* of my characters are people who are stuck and can't move. The grandmother in *Lost in Yonkers* has been stuck for the last seventy years. The mother in *Broadway Bound*—she's *really* stuck.

INTERVIEWER

I remember George in *Chapter Two* saying, "I'm stuck, Jennie . . . I'm just stuck some place in my mind, and it's driving me crazy." Going back to *Barefoot in the Park,* Corie's pretty hard on your surrogate Neil when she tells him he's not a doer. But, come to think of it, what could be more venturesome and brave—or foolhardy—than the real Neil opening a play on Broadway and exposing it to the critics and the audience?

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SIMON

It *is* the most frightening thing in the world—and it was almost a matter of life and death for Joan and me with *Come Blow Your Horn.* If it had failed I would have been forced to move to California and become a comedy writer in television. But I don't worry about it anymore, and I think not being fearful of what's going to happen has allowed me to write so much. If I *do* worry, I say I won't do the play, because that means I don't think it's that good.

INTERVIEWER

Is the opposite true? Can you anticipate a hit?

SIMON

I never think of the plays as being hits when I write them. Well, I thought *Rumors,* of all plays, would be a really good commercial comedy if I wrote it well. I thought *The Odd Couple* was a black comedy. I never thought it was going to be popular, ever.

INTERVIEWER

It's your most popular play, isn't it? All over the world.

SIMON

Yes. And I thought it was a grim, dark play about two lonely men. I thought *The Sunshine Boys* wouldn't be a popular play, but it was very well received. *Chapter Two* was another one I doubted, because when you touch on a character's guilt, you touch on the *audience's* guilt, and that makes them uncomfortable. Yet the play turned out to be very successful because it was a universal theme. *Lost in Yonkers* is an enormous success, but I thought I was writing the bleakest of plays. What I liked about it was that I thought it was Dickensian: two young boys left in the hands of dreadful people. What I was afraid of was that I would hear words like *melodrama.*

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INTERVIEWER

You heard "Pulitzer Prize." There are several plays that don't seem to fit in your canon. In plays like *The Good Doctor, Rumors, Fools* and *God's Favorite* you seem to have a different agenda, there's a different relationship between you and the play than the one you've described. Could that explain their lack of critical and popular success?

SIMON

I wrote *The Good Doctor* soon after I learned my wife had a year and a half to live. She didn't know that. On the advice of the doctors, I'd elected not to tell her, and I wanted to keep on working, so it would seem to her that everything was normal. I was reading Chekhov's short stories and decided, just for practice, to translate one of them into my own language, my own humor. I knew it was a diversion. After a performance, a woman grabbed me in the foyer and said, "This is not Neil Simon!" *Fools* was an experiment that didn't work. *God's Favorite* is an absurdist black comedy about Job that was written as an outcry of anger against Joan's death. My belief in God had vanished when this beautiful young girl was dying. I wasn't Archibald MacLeish. I thought it would be pretentious for me to try to write something like a dramatic *JB.* So, I wrote it as a black comedy, and it did help me get through that period. Sometimes you write a play just for the sake of working at it. It's my craft. I'm allowed to go in any direction I want. I hate being pushed into certain places. Walter Kerr once wrote that he thought I was successful because I didn't listen to what was in fashion in the theater and went my own way at my peril, and that sometimes I suffered for it, and at other times I broke through. With *Lost in Yonkers* I suddenly heard from critics who said, "This is a new voice for Neil Simon. We want you to go deeper and deeper into this area." At the same time other critics complained, "I don't like this as much. It's not as funny as the old plays." They

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wanted *Barefoot in the Park* and *The Odd Couple.* I could have spent my whole life writing the *Barefoot in the Parks* and *Odd Couples,* which I certainly don't denigrate, because I love them—but, where would I have gone with my life? I would have been standing still, grinding out the same story time after time after time. What I've done, I think, is take the best of me and the best of my observations and try to deepen them to reform them and re-flesh them. At some point along the way you discover what it is you do best. Recently I've been reading Samuel Beckett's biography. When he was about forty-four years old, he said he wanted to write monologue. It was his way of expressing himself to the world. *He* was shy, too. In a sense, I think many of my plays are dramatized monologues. It's like sitting around the fire and telling you the story of my life and my father and my mother and my cousins and my aunts. In *Lost in Yonkers* I know I'm *one* of those two boys, probably the younger one. Who that grandmother is, who Aunt Bella is, with her adolescent mind, I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to be saying that *Lost in Yonkers* is even less autobiographical than the Brighton Beach trilogy.

SIMON

I'd say *Lost in Yonkers* isn't autobiographical at all. You asked me earlier whether I write thematic plays. I don't, but I have a feeling that in *Lost in Yonkers* there was a theme within me that was crying to get out, a common denominator that got to everybody. In the last fifteen, twenty years, a phrase has come into prominence that didn't exist in my childhood: dysfunctional family. My mother's and father's constant breakups seemed to show little concern for my brother and me. It was like coming from *five* broken families. That pain lingers. Writing plays is a way of working out your life. That's why I can never conceive of stopping, because I would stop the investigation of who I am and what I am.

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INTERVIEWER

You have the reputation of being a tireless, even an eager, rewriter. How much of the rewriting is done during the first drafts of the play, and how much do you rewrite after the play has gone into rehearsal?

SIMON

I would say that I do no fewer than three to four major rewrites on a play before we go into rehearsal. I write the play, put it aside, take it out six months later, read it. By then I've forgotten everything about the play. It's as though someone had sent it to me in the mail and I'm reading it for the first time. I can tell right away what I don't and do like. That becomes a very easy rewrite: you just get rid of the stuff you don't like. Then we start auditions for actors, so I keep hearing the words every day. After a while I can't stand some of them, and I start to rewrite, so, in later auditions, the actors get a better script to read. I finally say it's the last draft before we go into rehearsal, and we have a reading of the play in a room with just the producer, director and a few of the other people who will work on the play, one month before rehearsal. At that reading we have the entire cast, so now I know what it's going to sound like. Based on that reading, I'll do another major rewrite. It's rare that I would ever do what they do in musicals: "Why don't we switch scene four and scene two?" I write in a linear way, so that everything falls apart if you take anything out. Sometimes, if even a few sentences come out of the play, something suffers for it later on. Once the play opens out of town, the most important rewriting begins, based on not only the audience's and the out-of-town critics' reactions, but the reactions of ourselves, the actors, and some people we've invited to see the play and comment. I also listen—if I can, to the audience's comments on the way out of the theater. That becomes harder now that I've lost my invisibility.

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INTERVIEWER

How do you remain objective with all those voices in your ear?

SIMON

Mostly it's my own intuition. I bring in rewrites no one has asked for. I'll suddenly come in with five pages, and the director and the actors will say, "You didn't like the other stuff?" I'll say, "I think this is better." If you bring in seven pages, maybe three will work. That's a big percentage. You're way ahead of the game. An analogy for it would be if you were in college and took a test, and your grade came back. You got a sixty-three on the test, and they say, "Come back tomorrow. You'll be given exactly the same test. There'll be no new questions." Well, you're going to get an eighty-four on the second test. You'll have had chances to fix it. That's what happens to a play. Day by day, it gets better and better. In the case of *Jake's Women,* in the first production a couple of years ago, there were a lot of things wrong. It was miscast, I had a director I was unfamiliar with who didn't really understand my process. We opened with a play that was about a sixty-two on a possible grade of a hundred. I brought the play up to about a seventy-eight. As we got toward the end of the run, just prior to going to New York, I thought, you can't get by in New York with a seventy-eight. You need at least a ninety-six or ninety-seven. So, I said to everyone, let's just pull it. And we did. I thought it was dead forever, because I'd put so much into it and wasn't able to save it. Two years later I took another crack at it and did a major rewrite in which, as I've told you, I had Jake speak to the audience. The play took a whole new turn. I thought it was finally up in the ninety-percent bracket.

INTERVIEWER

If a play is truly flawed, how much can you do to improve it?

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SIMON

Well, in the case of something like *The Gingerbread Lady,* which *was* a flawed play, the producer was going to put up a closing notice in Boston. Maureen Stapleton, who was starring in the play, came to me and said, "If you close this play I'll never speak to you again." She said, "This is a potentially wonderful play. It needs work but don't walk away from it!" I thought, what a reasonable thing to say, because all it amounted to was more of my time. The producer said he wanted to close, to save me "from the slings and arrows of the critics in New York." I said, "I can take the slings and arrows. I've had enough success up to now. I'll *learn* from this one." What finally made up my mind, after reading three terrible reviews in Boston, was, while waiting at the airport for my plane, I picked up *The Christian Science Monitor,* and the review was a letter addressed to me. It said, "Dear Neil Simon, I know you're probably going to want to close this play, but I beg of you, don't do it. This is potentially the best play you have written. You're going into a whole new genre, a whole new mode of writing. Don't abandon it." So, I called the producer and said, "Please don't close the play. Let's run in Boston and see what happens." Then, I didn't want to get on a plane and arrive in New York an hour later; I wanted a four-hour trip on a train, so I could start the rewrite. By the time I got to New York I had rewritten fifteen pages of the play. I stayed in New York for a week and came back with about thirty-five new pages. And we went to work. The play was never a major success, but we did have a year's run, and sold it to the movies. Maureen Stapleton won the Tony Award, and Marsha Mason, who played the lead in the film version, got an Oscar nomination. So, something good came out of persevering.

INTERVIEWER

Your plays have become darker in the last several years. Is this a sign of maturity or a wish to be taken

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seriously, since comedy generally isn't as highly regarded as so-called "serious plays?"

SIMON

Maybe the plays matured because *I* matured. I *do* want to be taken more seriously, yet I want to hear the laughter in the theater. The laughs are very often the same gratification to the audience as letting themselves cry. They're interchangeable emotions.

INTERVIEWER

Most of the darker plays take place in your childhood. Does that mean that your childhood was dark, or that your view of your childhood and perhaps of the world has darkened as you've matured?

SIMON

My view of my childhood was always dark, but my view of the world has darkened considerably. The darkness in my plays reflects the way the world is *now.* The darkness in the plays, strangely enough, seems more beautiful to me. I think anything that is truthful has beauty in it. Life without the dark times is unrealistic. I don't want to write unrealistically anymore.

INTERVIEWER

What do you consider your strongest suit as a writer? And what in your view is your weakest suit?

SIMON

I think my blue suit is my weakest.

INTERVIEWER

I knew it would come to this.

SIMON

I think my greatest weakness is that I can't write outside of my own experience. I'm not like Paddy Chayefsky

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who could go off and do six months of research and then write something extremely believable. I'd *like* to write about Michelangelo, but I don't *know* Michelangelo. I don't know what his life was like. I wish I could extend myself, but I don't think that's going to happen. I might play around with it from time to time. Those are the ones that wind up in the drawer.

INTERVIEWER

If you ever have a fire sale of the contents of that drawer, call me. What would you say is your particular strength?

SIMON

I think it's construction. Maybe what I write is outmoded today, the "well-made play"—a play that tells you what the problem is, then shows you how it affects everybody, then resolves it. Resolution doesn't mean a happy ending—which I've been accused of. I don't think I write happy endings. Sometimes I have *hopeful* endings, sometimes optimistic ones. I try never to end the play with two people in each other's arms—unless it's a musical. When I was writing three-act plays, a producer told me the curtain should always come down on the beginning of the fourth act. A play should never really come to an end. The audience should leave saying, "What's going to happen to them now?" As the plays progressed, some people wanted darker endings. Some critics even said the ending of *Lost in Yonkers* wasn't dark enough. But I can't write a play as dark and bleak and wonderful as *A Streetcar Named Desire.* I fall in some gray area. There is so much comedy within the dramas or so much drama within the comedies.

INTERVIEWER

In her interview for *The Paris Review,* Dorothy Parker said she got her character names from the telephone book and obituary columns. Do you have a system for naming *your* characters?

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SIMON

There was a time I used to take baseball players' names. The famous ones were too obvious, so you had to take names like Crespi. There was a guy named Creepy Crespi who played for the St. Louis Cardinals. Crespi would be a good name, although I've never used it.

INTERVIEWER

It's got a nice *K* sound in it.

SIMON

Yes. I try to name the character the way the character looks to me. I spend more time on the titles of plays than on the names of the characters. What I've tried to do over the years is take an expression from life that has a double entendre in it, for example, the musical *Promises, Promises,* so that every time people speak the words it sounds like they're talking about your play. Or *The Odd Couple*—people sometimes say, "They're sort of an odd couple." If you mention an odd couple now, you think of the play. I've seen the words maybe a thousand times in newspapers since, and it seems as if I originated the term, which, of course, I didn't. *Come Blow Your Horn* comes from the nursery rhyme. *Barefoot in the Park* came from what the play was about. There's a line in the play that comes from my life, when Joan used to say to me, "Stop being a fuddy-duddy. Let's go to Washington Square Park and walk barefoot in the grass." *Chapter Two* was, literally, the second chapter of my life, after my wife Joan died, and I married Marsha. *Prisoner of Second Avenue* was a good title for a play about a man who loses his job and is left to live in that little apartment on Second Avenue while his wife goes to work. He has nothing to do but walk around the room 'til he knows exactly how many feet each side is—so he's literally a prisoner. *The Gingerbread Lady* is a bad title. I liked the title and then had to make up a phrase about the gingerbread lady to make it fit. The

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film title was better: *Only When I Laugh. The Star-Spangled Girl* was a better title than a play. I liked *Last of the Red Hot Lovers.* It seemed familiar. It comes from Sophie Tucker's slogan, "Last of the Red Hot Mamas." *Lost in Yonkers*—I love the word Yonkers, and I wanted to put the play in a specific place. I said to myself, "*What* in Yonkers?" These boys are lost, Bella is lost, this family is *all* lost . . . in Yonkers. *Jake's Women* is literally about a man named Jake and three women. Again, there's the *K* sound in Jake.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about stage directors. How much can a director help a play? Or, conversely, hurt it?

SIMON

Well, in the early days, I worked principally with Mike Nichols. He was after me day and night. "This scene isn't good enough. Work on this. Fix this." He'd call me at two or three in the morning, to the point where I'd say, "Mike, give me a chance, leave me alone. You're on my back all the time." But, I always knew he was right. I wasn't that experienced a playwright. The way I work now—with Gene Saks—the conversation is generally short. He might say to me, "There's something wrong with this scene." I'll say, "I know what you mean. Let me go home and work on it." I'm much less influenced by the director now than I was before. I depend on the director in terms of *interpretation* of the play. With the Brighton Beach trilogy and *Lost in Yonkers,* I watched with clenched fists and teeth as Gene was directing, thinking, that's wrong, it's all wrong what he's doing. Then, suddenly, I *saw* what he was doing, and said, "Oh God! He has to go step by step to get to this place, trying all his things, the way *I* would try them at the writer's table."

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INTERVIEWER

How much do actors influence you? Is it ever the case that the personality of an actor influences you to remold the character to the actor, playing into what you now perceive to be the actor's strength?

SIMON

I might do that. But what I try to do in terms of rewriting is always to benefit the *character,* not the actor. There's something an actor sometimes says that drives me crazy: "I would never do that." I say you're *not* doing this, the *character* is. The one thing I almost always look for is the best actor, not the funniest actor. I rarely, rarely cast a comedian in a play. The best comedian I ever had in a play was George C. Scott. He was funnier than anybody in the third act of *Plaza Suite* because he was playing King Lear. He knew the essence of comedy is not to play "funny." I remember, at the first reading of *Barefoot in the Park,* the whole cast was laughing at every line in the play. When we finished the reading, Mike Nichols said, "Now forget it's a comedy. From here on we're playing *Hamlet.*"

INTERVIEWER

I notice in the printed plays that you use ellipses, italics and all-caps. I assume the ellipses are meant to tell the actors when you want them to pause, the italics are meant to give emphasis, and that all-caps ask for added emphasis, even volume.

SIMON

Yes. They are a first indication to the actor and the director. Some of those emphases change enormously in the rehearsal period, but I also have to worry about what's going to be done in stock and amateur and European productions, so I hope it's a guide to what I meant. *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* opens in the dark. All we see

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is a cigarette, as Mel Edison comes in. The part was played by Peter Falk. He sat down on the sofa, took a puff of the cigarette, and in the dark we heard, "Aaaahhhhhhh." I don't know how you're going to be able to spell that, but it's got a lot of *h*s in it—a *lot* of them. It got a huge laugh because the audience heard two thousand years of suffering in that "Aaaahhhhhhh." When Peter left and other actors played the part, they would go, "Ahh." There weren't enough *h*s, and the line wasn't funny. People tell me that when they study my work in acting class, the teachers have to give them the sounds, the nuances, the way the lines are said. I guess Shakespeare can be said a thousand different ways, but in certain kinds of lines—for example, that run on "Ho" in *Biloxi Blues*—everything depends on the timing of it. I've always considered all of this a form of music. I wish I could write tempo directions, like *allegro* and *adagio.* That's why I put dots between words or underline certain words, to try to convey the sense of music, dynamics and rhythm.

INTERVIEWER

Do the critics ever help you, shedding light on your work, regardless of whether they're praising or damning it?

SIMON

Walter Kerr gave me one of the best pieces of criticism I've ever had. In the first line of his review of *The Star-Spangled Girl,* he said, "Neil Simon didn't have an idea for a play this year, but he wrote it anyway." That was exactly what had happened. Elliot Norton was very helpful to me in Boston with *The Odd Couple.* His title of the opening night review was, "Oh, for a Third Act." He wasn't going to waste his time telling everyone how good the first two acts were. His job, he felt, was to make me make the third act better. And his suggestion to me was to bring back the Pigeon sisters. I said, "Good idea,"

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brought back the Pigeon sisters, and the play worked. More important than the reviews, it's the audience that tells you whether or not you've succeeded. A week prior to the opening of the play you know if it's going to work or not. If ninety percent of the critics say it doesn't work, well, you already knew that without having to read the reviews. On the other hand, the opening night of *Little Me,* Bob Fosse and I were standing in the back of the theater. The producers had allowed a black-tie audience to come from a dinner to the theater. They'd eaten, they'd had drinks, they all knew each other—that's the worst audience you can get. About three-quarters of the way through the first act, a man got up, so drunk he could hardly walk, and staggered up the aisle looking for the men's room. As he passed Bob and me, he said, "This is the worst piece of crap I've seen since *My Fair Lady!*" Go figure out what *that* means.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe the reason comedies like *Barefoot in the Park, The Odd Couple* and *The Sunshine Boys* are sometimes underrated is quite simply that the audience is laughing at them—rather than worrying, weeping, learning—or doing any of the other virtuous things an audience is reputed to be doing at a drama. However, I think most writers would agree that it is relatively easy to make people cry and very, very hard to make them laugh.

SIMON

Billy Wilder, whom I respect enormously, once confided in me, "Drama's a lot easier than comedy." He found some of the brilliant dramas he wrote, like *Sunset Boulevard,* much easier to write than the comedies. Comedies are relentless, especially a farce like *Some Like It Hot. Rumors* was the most difficult play I ever wrote because not only did every moment of that play have to further the story, complicate it and keep the characters in motion—*literal* motion, swinging in and out of doors—

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but the audience had to laugh at every *attempt* at humor. You don't have five minutes where two people can sit on a sofa and just say, "What am I doing with my life, Jack? Am I crazy? Why don't I get out of this?" You can do that in a drama. You can't do it in a farce.

INTERVIEWER

Do you make it a point to see the plays of other playwrights?

SIMON

When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I went to the theater a lot. There was always a Tennessee Williams play to see or a great English play. It was such an education. I learned more from bad plays than from good ones. Good plays are a mystery. You don't know what it is that the playwright did right. More often than not you see where a work fails. One of the things I found interesting was that a lot of comedy came from drunks on the stage. If a character was drunk he was funny. I thought, wouldn't it be great to write characters who are as funny as drunks, but are not drunk. In other words, bring out the *outrageousness* of them, and the only way you can do that is to put them in such a tight corner that they have to say what's really on their minds. That's where the humor comes from.

INTERVIEWER

Are you a good audience for other people's work? Do you laugh in the theater? I know some writers who are just not good audiences. Would you call yourself a good audience?

SIMON

I'd call myself a *great* audience. I'm appreciative of good work, no matter what its form—comedy, drama, musical. I saw *Amadeus* four times. *A Streetcar Named Desire* I could see over and over. When I'm in England

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I go to some of the most esoteric English plays, plays that never even come over here, and I'm just amazed at them. I've recently caught up with the works of Joe Orton. I love Tom Stoppard's plays *Jumpers* and *Travesties,* and I admire the work of Peter Schaffer. If it's good theater, yes, I'm the best audience. I'm out there screaming.

INTERVIEWER

Comedy has changed in a very noticeable way in the last thirty years. Subjects and language that were taboo are now almost obligatory. Do you think that indicates progress?

SIMON

I like the fact that one can touch on subjects one wouldn't have dealt with in years gone by. The things that Lenny Bruce got arrested for you can find on any cable station today. Television situation comedy doesn't seem as funny to me as what Chaplin and Buster Keaton did without words. There are a few good comedians, but by and large I don't think comedy is a lot better today.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to exercise a certain constraint over the language of your plays. Even *Biloxi Blues* doesn't use the kind of profanity and obscenity I remember from my days at that same airfield.

SIMON

I think to say *fuck* once in an entire play is much more shocking than to say it sixty times. Four of the last five plays I've written took place in the thirties and forties, when profanity wasn't used on stage—or in the home. The fifth play, *Rumors,* is contemporary, and it's *filled* with profanity. But I don't need profanity. I love language, and I'd rather find more interesting ways to use it than take the easy way out.

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INTERVIEWER

Every playwright has fingerprints. You've mentioned thinking of your plays in musical terms, and one fingerprint of yours seems to be the "aria." At a certain point in almost every one of your plays a character *in extremis* launches into an extended list of all the catastrophes that are happening to him. In *Come Blow Your Horn,* Alan says, "You're using my barber, my restaurants, my ticket broker, my apartment and my socks. How's it going, kid? Am I having fun?" In *Plaza Suite* the father explodes, "You can take all the Eislers, all the hors d'oeuvres and go to Central Park and have an eight thousand dollar picnic! I'm going down to the Oak Room with my broken arm, with my drenched, rented, ripped suit and I'm going to get blind!" Are you aware of doing that?

SIMON

Yes, it's a fingerprint. You'll notice that those arias always come near the end of the play. The character has reached the point where he can't contain himself anymore, and everything comes spurting out, like a waterfall, a cascade of irritations. Just mentioning one of them wouldn't be funny, but to mention *all* the irritations wraps up a man's life in one paragraph.

INTERVIEWER

The words you use to describe your comedy are words that are generally associated not with comedy at all, but with tragedy. You've talked about catharsis and your characters exploding when they can't bear the pain anymore.

SIMON

Yes. That's why I don't find television comedy very funny—because it's hardly ever about anything important. I think the weightier comedy is, the funnier it is. To me, Chaplin's films are masterpieces. Remember him running after a truck with the red warning flag that has fallen off it?

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INTERVIEWER

And he doesn't see hundreds of rioting radicals falling enthusiastically in behind him . . .

SIMON

So he gets busted and goes to jail as their leader.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe when the record is written a hundred years from now it will turn out that all our comedy writers, from Chaplin and Keaton to you and Woody Allen, were writing tragedies. What's the cliché? Comedy is tragedy plus time. How fine is the line between tragedy and comedy?

SIMON

It's almost invisible. I think Mel Brooks is one of the funniest people in the world, but when he makes a picture like *Spaceballs,* he's telling us, "This is foolishness. No one is in danger," so the audience knows it's too inconsequential to laugh at. But when he does a picture like *High Anxiety* or *Young Frankenstein* there's something at stake. He's taken a frightening idea and twisted it, so we're able to laugh at it.

INTERVIEWER

Here comes a difficult question . . .

SIMON

As long as it doesn't have to do with math.

INTERVIEWER

I don't know a writer who wouldn't say that—or a musician who isn't *good* at math. Because music is mathematical, I guess.

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SIMON

But so are plays. As surely as two plus two is four, the things you write in the play must add up to some kind of logical figure. In *Broadway Bound,* when Stan is teaching Eugene the craft of comedy, Eugene says, "It's just a comedy sketch. Does it have to be so logical? We're not drawing the plans for the Suez Canal," and Stan says, "Yes we are. It's not funny if it's not believable."

INTERVIEWER

Well, now that we've covered math and logic, here's the difficult question. You write repeatedly about an uptight man and a liberating woman: is that because it's a reflection of your relationship with the women in your life—or because you feel it's a common and important theme?

SIMON

The answer is quite simple. It's because I'm an uptight man who's been married to three liberated women. Joan was the first liberated woman I ever met and the most unconventional. She introduced me to more ways of looking at life than I'd ever dreamed of. She was more adventuresome than I'd ever been. She would jump from a plane in a parachute, and I'm the uptight man who would say, "You're crazy." Marsha was the same way. She was a feminist and had me marching in parades with a flag, yelling for women's rights. It's not that I didn't believe in women's rights, but I'm not an activist. Diane is an environmentalist, an ecologist and also a fighter for the rights of women. Go over all the plays. With the exception of *The Odd Couple* and *The Sunshine Boys,* you'll find that the women are not only stronger but more interesting characters than the men. Again, the men are usually the Greek chorus. That's me sitting there, little Neil, born Marvin, observing the world—verbally, from a very safe place,

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which is what the man does in *Barefoot in the Park,* which is what he does in *Chapter Two,* in almost every play.

INTERVIEWER

In the theater, in films, rugged men usually liberate unfulfilled women. From what you say, your plays reverse that convention.

SIMON

Yes. I never feel threatened by women. I have enormous respect for them. I would also usually rather be with them than with men. I'm not much of a male bonder. I have male friends, obviously. I belong to tennis clubs. But in a social situation, I'd generally rather talk to a woman because it's like a play: you're getting the opposite point of view. You talk to a man, you're getting your own point of view. It becomes redundant. But when you're with a woman, that's when the sparks fly, that's when it's most interesting.

INTERVIEWER

Plays these days are usually in two acts rather than three, and you are using more and shorter scenes. Is that the result of changes in stage technology? Are you being influenced by film?

SIMON

I think I've been influenced by films, which have been influenced by television and commercials. Today you can see a one-minute commercial with about forty setups in it. There's a need to pace things differently because the audience's attention span has grown shorter. *Biloxi Blues* was the first major example of that because I had fourteen set changes. What also helped speed things along was that I started writing plays with larger casts, so there were many more entrances and exits. Also, having a narrator makes big time-leaps possible. I *am* influenced by new

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technologies and techniques, but that doesn't mean I'm following the fashions. It just means that I'm moving to another phase in my career—I'm becoming less literal and more abstract.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned finding your characters waiting for you every time you walk into your office. Dickens complained that he hated to end his books because he didn't want to say good-bye to the characters he'd been living with.

SIMON

That's why I don't go back to see my plays again, because they belong to someone else—to the actors and the audience. That process happens in a series of events. First, you finish writing the play, and everyone reads it. Then you go into rehearsal. Day by day, it slowly becomes the director's and the actors'. They're still asking me questions. I'm still participating. I'm still the father of these children. They get onstage, and soon the play is finished. They no longer need me! I feel locked out, I'm not part of them. After the play opens, I'm almost embarrassed to go backstage, because it's the place that belongs to the director and the actors. I'm just the man who introduced the characters to them. It's a very, very sad feeling for me. What happens eventually—it may sound cold—is that I disown them. I have no interest in seeing the plays again. In fact, it's painful, especially when a play has run for a long time and new actors have come in to replace the original cast. When I walk into that theater, it's as if I were picking up my family album, and turning the pages to see my mother and father and aunt and cousins—and I say, "This isn't my family!" So, you give it up and go on to the next play.

INTERVIEWER

And the next. And the next.

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SIMON

Every time I write a play it's the beginning of a new life for me. Today as I listen to you read excerpts from these plays and talk about them, it makes me feel nostalgic about how wonderful those days were—but I'm enjoying *these* days of writing, even though I see that the sun is setting.

—James Lipton

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Jack and Jill: An Exegetical Aria

John Barth

Jack and Jill
Went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water.

Jack fell down
And broke his crown,
And Jill came tumbling after.

As is the case with most nursery rhymes, the meter of this classic specimen is simple and rigorous, even monotonous, and exactly replicated between the two stanzas.[1] There are no variations whatever in the elementary alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, with a slight delay after each stress: a lilting, skipping rhythm suggestive of virtually carefree early childhood—such as my twin sister's and mine in East Cambridge, Maryland, through the dark years of the Great Depression—

[1]Further stanzas can be found, but what child remembers them?

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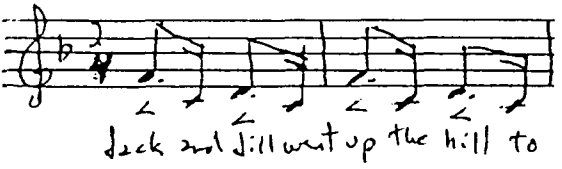
although the action described is not play, but a homely household chore from the days before indoor plumbing. A simple rhyme scheme *(aab/ccb)* and stanzaic structure (short dimeter couplet followed by a single trimeter), its single, small irregularity would appear to be the off-rhyme of the *b* trimeters, *water/after.*

Close scansion, however, reveals the apparent simplicity of the poem's prosody to be deceptive, especially if one compares the recited and the most familiarly sung versions. Is the foot iambic (da-*da*) or trochaic (*da*-da)? Each stanza opens with an apparent trochee (*Jack* and . . . */Jack* fell . . .) and closes likewise (*wa*-ter/*af*-ter), but a glance at lines two and three of each stanza persuades us at once that the foot is meant to be the homely English iamb: Went *up*|the *hill* / To *fetch*| a *pail,* etc. Once we note that the syllabification of the lines is less simple than their rhyme scheme and alternating accent—not 4-4-7, 4-4-7, but *3*-4-7, *3*-4-7—we can reasonably describe the prosody of the recited poem thus: two three-line stanzas, *aab ccb,* each consist of an iambic dimeter couplet, its initial unstressed beat not given, followed by an iambic trimeter third line with a supernumerary final soft syllable to compensate for the missing opener.

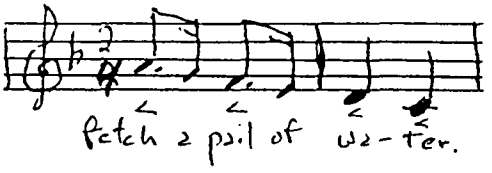
An alternative, trochaic scanning is possible, with the virtue of eliminating the need for prosodic "epicycles," as it were, to account for the "missing" first syllable and the "supernumerary" closing syllable of each stanza. But such scansion requires an unnatural rearrangement of the lines—*Jack* and |*Jill* went/ *Up* the |*hill* to/ *Fetch* a |*pail* of |*wa*-ter—and moreover wrenches the happy skipping rhythm of *Jack* . . . and *Jill* . . . went *up* . . . the *hill* . . . into gimpy, un-English stresses: *Jack* and . . . *Jill* went . . . *up* the . . . *hill* to. . . .

Interestingly (to those who take an interest in such technics, the art of art), the common musical version of Jack and Jill accentuates the lilting iambic scansion while measuring the lines trochaically. Scored in 2/4 time, the unstressed syllables become sixteenth notes before dotted-eighth-note stresses.

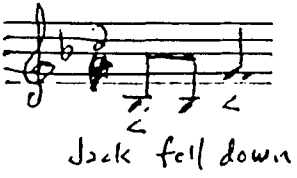
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Lines three and six become tetrameters instead of trimeters, with full weight given to the stanza's final syllable, unstressed in natural speech but not in song.



On the other hand, the musical version is marked by incongruities between melody and meaning: the closing line of the "ascent" stanza, for example (given above), is a *descending* melody, which might be rationalized as foreshadowing the children's fall in stanza two, were it not that the same odd inversion recurs in line four—where, as Jack falls down, the melody springs gaily *up*—



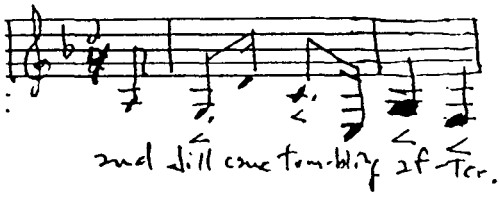
—and again in line six, where Jill's after-tumble is sung to a sprightly *ascending* melody:



With the song's harmony, the anonymous tunesmith is

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more successful in mating sound and sense: the major chords of the cheerful hill climb give way to minor when mishap befalls the water-fetchers. True, the closing bars shift back to major and reinforce the bizarre melodic suggestion of happy ending; one either accepts the incongruousness as a folk-Mozartian musical irony (nursery rhymes abound in such grim cheeriness) or prefers this less commonly heard but more appropriate variant—



which sustains the minor sonority as well as singing Jill's tumble in a melodically descending curve.

These preliminary observations made, we turn to the particulars of the poem's signification, beginning with its Dantean wedding of form and content in both macro- and microstructural features. Just as the three books of the *Commedia* and their *terza rima* building blocks reflect Christianity's tripartite eschatology and the unity of the Trinity, so this blithe nursery rhyme about the fall of an at least originally innocent couple proceeds by duples: *two* metrically identical stanzas (*twin* stanzas, one is tempted to say) each commence with a *couplet* in a *dimeter* that, whether scanned iambically or trochaically, employs a *two*-beat foot—more levels of two than Dante has threes. And just as the Florentine's *terza rima* interlinks his stanzas—*aba bcb cdc,* etc.—so the twin stanzas of J & J are coupled (slantwise, inexactly) by their *b* off-rhyme, *water/after.* Would it not have been more in keeping with the theme of dupleness or doubling (not to say *duplicity*), to render the poem entirely in couplets—four of them, perhaps, in two stanzas, to get away from threes altogether? Arguably so, but consider the trade-offs: the hobblingly unrelieved dimeters, the loss of interstanzaic linkage (it's either *aa bb/cc dd* or *aa bb/aa bb,* more a

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cloning than a coupling; or *aa bb/bb aa,* suggesting an ascent/descent in course of which *nothing consequential happens;* or *aa bb/ab ab*—the metaphorical possibilities of which this exegete declines to consider).

In fact, as shall be seen, that "odd" third line of each stanza serves a number of poetic purposes, not least among them release from the constrictive dimeter couplets: a playing of twos against threes reflected in and reflective of the line's tripedality. "Who is the third," Eliot's *The Waste Land* asks, "who walks always beside you?"

Let's zoom in:

I

Jack and Jill. On an empty stage, two characters in three monosyllables. In the minimalist way of nursery rhymes, all "background" exposition is dispensed with: no "Once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived . . ."; none of "that David Copperfield kind of crap," as J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield calls such introductory resumés. We are afforded scarcely a clue to the pair's age, relationship or situation. Illustrators of Mother Goose books regularly presume J & J to be young children, no doubt on the grounds that if both *go* to fetch a single pail of water, both must be *needed* to carry the pail; all illustrations show the pair of them lugging even the *empty* pail together in stanza one[2]—small children indeed, or else they hold the vessel jointly out of simple reciprocal affec-

[2]e.g.:



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tion, as unself-conscious children might hold hands while walking or skipping along. A reasonable presumption, but only a presumption. All that we can say with confidence is that the characters are two, not one or several; that on the evidence of their given names they are male and female; that those given names are what they are (English, for one thing, like the poem itself, implying an Anglophone venue for the action to follow); and that in the order of their introduction, at least, Jack precedes Jill. A cultural reflex of male primacy? Very likely. Reflective of a customary male initiative in such enterprises as hill-ascending, water-fetching, etc.? Likewise likely—though Jill's relegation to the end of the line may be owing to nothing more invidious than the resources of English rhyme. *Jill and Jack/Went out the back? Up the track? Down the crack?* Unpromising openers. It may well be *the hill* that constrains Jill to her secondary position and Jack, a fortiori, to his primary; one might argue that he comes first because she must come second, instead of the other way around—although most likely the supply of apt English rhymes merely happens in this instance to reinforce the cultural case: the steep and slippery hill of male initiative and female response, male thrust and female parry or riposte. Jack leads, Jill follows and the rhyme—and thus the topography and its consequences—follows Jill's following.[3]

Went up the hill. The three monosyllables of character are followed by four of action and scene. The attentive reader notes that whatever the age of these presumable children, they are not obliged to *climb* the hill, although that verb would as easily fit the meter; they simply "go up" it. The implication is that their *Wasserhügel* is a gentle grade, not a steep incline[4]—a circumstance that deep-

[3]The singer of this exegetical aria—who with his opposite-sex twin was consequentially named after the nursery rhyme by our then three-year-old brother—in autobiographical fact *followed* his sister into the world by eighty minutes.

[4]Scarcely even a grade in some illustrations: viz. the woodcut terrain of

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ens the mystery of their approaching mishap. Alternatively, they may be not such toddlers as would find a moderately steep slope something of a climb, even empty-bucketed. Perhaps they're vigorous teenagers? Young adults? In any case, up the hill they go, without apparent trepidation or difficulty. As remarked above, the cheery rhythm of both the recited and the sung versions suggests that they fairly *skip* uphill.

Up what hill? Not *"a* hill"; not "Lake Hill" or "Waterwell Hill"—simply *"the* hill": a proto-modernist "presumptive exposition" quite in keeping with the minimalistic characterization and not uncommon in nursery rhymes (*"the* mouse ran up *the* clock"), but scarcely to be found in prose fiction before the twentieth century.[5]

A water-well atop or at least aflank a hill? Perhaps a clear mountain spring, in the days before one worried about *Giardia lamblia* and other contaminants. Some pleasant, Cotswoldish "Spring Hill," one imagines, of less ominous connotation than the American locus of Richard Brautigan's poem *The Pill Versus the Spring Hill Mine Disaster.* To the wellspring, is where our eager couple skip; *à la source.*

And why? *To fetch a pail of water.* What art is in this seven-syllable line, this three-line stanza, this two-stanza narrative! Syllabically equal to but metrically distinct from the preceding couplet, the trimetric third line's stresses are distributed over its seven syllables in a way that effectively prevents its being mistaken for a second

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note 2 (reproduced, with the other woodcuts herein, from *Jack and Jill, and Old Dame Gill* [York: J. Kendrick, 1820])—as flat as Maryland's Eastern Shore.

[5]e.g., the opening lines of Ernest Hemingway's early story "Indian Camp": "At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting." What lake shore? What *first* rowboat? What two Indians? In the interest of immediacy, the modernist pretends that such things go without saying. Literary *post* modernists, on the other hand, have been known to revert to "that David Copperfield kind of crap."

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three-four couplet. As to the stanza: first it has given us the actors, then the action and scene (rather than the more conventional vice versa—as though the pair's first priority is *to go* and only secondarily to go some particular where); now, finally, as if in afterthought, we get the stated motive. One almost imagines a parent calling, "Jack? Jill? Where are you two going?"

"Oh, just up the hill."

"Up the hill? Whatever for?"

"Oh . . . [*etc.*]."

"Mm hm. Well, watch your step."

". . . ."

To fetch *a pail* of water. Every illustration to the contrary notwithstanding, the line itself does not explicitly provide the water-fetchers an empty bucket, any more than "Let's go for coffee" sets us out cup in hand. A pail*ful,* a pail's *worth* is as much as the text gives us undeniably. But we need not imagine Mom querying suspiciously, "So where's your bucket, young man and young lady?" The illustrators are on firm ground, both because hillside springs are not equipped with pail-dispensers like those paper-cup holders beside office water-coolers and because our story *needs* that pail from the expedition's outset. As sung already, it is the link between Jack and Jill: their conjunction, the couple's coupling and a sign to all who might catch sight of them that their errand is innocent, even commendable.

This masterful stanza's final *coup de maître* is its final word—more particularly (in the recited version) that final word's final syllable. Universal solvent, sine qua non of life, bearer of bottled messages both fake and bona-fide, *water* is also the poem's first polysyllable. As such, it ominously foreshadows its correlative, the *double* disyllables of Jill's downfall in line three of stanza two. Moreover, whether or not its unaccented final syllable is regarded as supplying the "missing" first syllable of line one, the word *water* breaks the poem's rhythm in two significant ways: it trips the iambs with a trochee, and the

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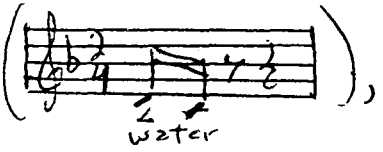
pacing of its unaccented syllable in fact rules out its being regarded as a complement to the truncated opening foot. Scored rigorously in the accents of speech, the word would appear not as two quarter notes



but as a sixteenth and dotted eighth



or an even more abrupt pair of sixteenths



followed in either case by the alarming silence of that quarter rest on the measure's closing beat.

Wet flagstones beside the well? Mossy rocks in the freshet below the spring? Some moist boundary mark overstepped? Whatever the efficient cause, in the word *water* we hear the skip become a trip, the step a misstep, the misstep a stumble, the stumble a teetering silence before . . .

II

Their fall, of course. Better, their *falls,* for whereas stanza one conjoins the couple in an at least ultimately side-by-side ascent—"mutual ascent," one might pun—stanza two explicitly separates and serializes their come-

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downance. Before examining the second stanza—more rapidly than we examined the first, as to fall takes less time than to rise[6]—we must ask what happened between the two. *What caused Jack's fall,* and subsequently/consequently Jill's?

On this literally central question, the text is as silent as that quarter rest in the amended score. Did the lad slip? Perhaps distracted or unbalanced by his pail-mate, did he mis-estimate some audacious step? We can only surmise—although the order of events, echoing the order of the characters' introduction, certainly suggests Jack's ongoing primary responsibility. He led, she followed, however willingly; he took her to the heights and then brought the both of them low. Be it on his crown, then, their downfall.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves, a fair way to tumble. *Jack fell down* is all we know for sure, though far from all we need or want to know. The poem contents itself with effects, leaving causes to the reader/listener's imagination—and those effects now concatenate line by line. Whatever the cause, *Jack fell down*—another instance of hubris (that which goeth before a fall) brought low?—*And broke his crown.* The climax of the poem's action is not merely a skull fracture with possible subdural hematoma on the not-so-gentle slopes of this Anglican Calvary (from Latin *calvāria,* skull [translation of Greek *kranion,* translation of Aramaic *gulgūtha,* whence Golgotha]), but the end of male regnancy, at least of Jack's.

And [read *Whereupon*] *Jill came tumbling after,* in an aptly tumbling line of denouement, with its artful double disyllables for closure. One line for Jill to Jack's two, but a strict equality of syllables. Not, however, an equality of consequences; reversing the order of narration in lines five and six (Jack falls, Jill tumbles after, Jack breaks

[6]In classical Greek tragedy, a single circuit of the sun suffices for peripety; in Mother Goose, three monosyllables.

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crown . . .) throws the disparity into high relief. Both fetchers fall, but the other shoe to Jack's crown-breaking never drops. The dramaturgical silence concerning non-consequences-to-Jill is as loud as that quarter rest of unspecified action between the stanzas.[7]

Justice served, we might feel: Jack led her up there by the pail; let Jack's be the crown that breaks. Punishment enough for the party of the second part that she takes her tumble: soiled frock, mussed hair, perhaps skinned knees and elbows; no water to show for their little adventure and all the explaining to do, as poor Jack's out of it. Assuming she can set things right with the homefolks, will Jill now wear Jack's erstwhile crown, we may wonder, or choose instead to devote herself to "caregiving" for her injured initiator? If indeed she assumes the crown of instigation and primary responsibility, will she presently lead Jack or some other back up that fateful "hill" (more circumspectly, one bets) or fetch water from some less risky source, or leave water-fetching to those whose

[7]As aforenoted, some Mother Goose compendia add further stanzas in which Jack trots home as fast as he can caper to one Old Dame Dob, who patches his knob with vinegar and brown paper, at sight of which plaster, when Jill comes in, she does grin, whereupon her mother, vexed, does whip her next, at the spectacle whereof Jack does laugh while Jill does cry, but their tears do soon abate, whereafter Jill does say that they should play at see-saw across the gate. No child remembers these addenda, which however make reasonably clear that the pair are siblings—and children, not yet ready for adult responsibilities and adventures, as these alarming woodcuts suggest:



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fingers, shall we say, have not been burnt in that pursuit?

Such conjectures are beyond our given text, however much it invites them. More appropriate to close-readership is the question, what happened to the pail? Outfielders may dive for a flyball, roll over several times and come up holding their catch securely, but nobody ever took a skull-cracking downhill fall or heptasyllabic epitumble without spilling his/her water and very possibly smashing the presumably wooden pail as well. All illustrators of the rhyme agree (with the spill, at least[8]); and although the singer of this exegetical aria remembers, from his undergraduate fraternity-house-bartending days, drunken Kappa Alphas pitching down the club-basement stairs with their open Schlitz bottles held safely aloft, out of harm's way, he concurs that J & J's fetching-expedition must have been a dead loss, waterwise. Inasmuch as stanza two is altogether silent on the matter of the pail, but explicit on the severity of Jack's fall and the posteriority of Jill's, the implication may be not only that the water was spilled and (as some illustrations have it) the bucket de-coopered into its constituent staves, but—contrary to those illustrations—that *no water was ever fetched;* that the obscure mishap mishappened before the pail was ever filled. In any case, by stanza two the couple has been decoupled, their symbolic link unlinked. Together they went up; they come down separately.

•

No use crying over spilt water: in that quarter rest between the paired stanzas, what happened happened, what didn't didn't. But Jack's crown was broke, Jill took

[8]e.g.:



which reenforces the causal mystery by showing "the hill" once again to be level—and Jack's right toe beyond the frame, like Jill's left hand.

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a tumble, and it's time to stop playing seesaw across the gate. Jack and Jill reorchestrates the Fall: Adam and Eve rescored by Mother Goose. The unacknowledged party of the third part, on this reading, is not "Old Dame Dob," but the Serpent, on that hilltop is the Garden[9] and in that garden the Forbidden Fruit. As my twin sister and I would be taught by our elementary-schoolmates before we knew the facts of life, the insinuating "subtext" of Jack and Jill is sibling incest: in our innocent case, a taboo not only unapproached but unimagined. For all our pail-toting general intimacy, we were altogether unself-conscious about (indeed, unconscious *of*) this out-of-hand-predamning aspect of Jackandjillery, until the fig-leaved world pointed its soiled fingers and reddened our innocent ears with prurient variations on the canonical text.[10]

[9]Hebrew, Christian and Islamic divine geographies often locate the Earthly Paradise on a hill or mountain: e.g., the top of Dante's Mount Purgatory and the Muslim's Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka.

[10]e.g.: *Jack and Jill / Went up the hill. / They each had a dollar and a quarter. / Jill came down / With two and a half: / Do you think they went up for water?* Et cetera ad nauseam.

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Two Poems by Charles Wright

To the Egyptian Mummy in the Etruscan Museum at Cortona

Wrapped like a sprained ankle from head to toe,
locked in glass
In an inconceivable country,
Spun on the sprung reflections caught in a stranger's eye
Year after year,
you would not imagine yourself if you could,
Peninsulaed as you are, and rare.

Outside the window, sun rains on the Middle Ages.
An upupa pecks in the tall grass.
Under the stone walls and stone towers,
the hillside unravels its tapestry,
A picnic in spring's green fire: one man's asleep and a young girl
Claps time for her brother who hand-dances with his dog.

One half-expects, say, Guidoriccio da Fogliano
In full regalia,
Or Malatesta, at least, at large from the Marches,
To climb the gut-twisted road through the quicksilver glint and tufa stone
Toward the south gate and you,
pale messenger from the wordless world . . .

Leonardo, Vasari says,
would purchase the caged, white doves
As he walked through the market sprawl of San Lorenzo
In order to set them free. I'll do
The same thing for you, unlatching this landscape, the vine rows and olive trees,
Till its wingspread shrinks to a radiance.
Look. Already it's getting smaller.

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There Is No Shelter

Each evening, the sins of the whole world collect here
like a dew.
In the morning, little galaxies, they flash out
And flame,
their charred, invisible residue etching

The edges our lives take and the course of things,
filling
The shadows in,
an aftertrace, through the discards of the broken world,
Like the long, slow burn of a struck match.

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Five Poems by Jorge Luis Borges

Last Evening

Thousands upon thousands of grains of sand,
Rivers that know no rest, the sparkling white
Snowflake more delicate than a shadow, light
Shadow of a leaf, the cloudless strand
Where the surf spreads its momentary foam,
The prehistoric pathways of the bison
And of the faithful arrow, a horizon
Or two, tobacco fields in a gray brume,
The mountain summit, the reposeful minerals,
The Orinoco, the elaborate game
That earth and air and fire and water frame,
League after league of docile animals,
Will take your hand from my hand clean away,
But then so will the night, the dawn, the day . . .

Milonga of the Stranger

The story is always the same story,
With every step retraced;
They tell the story in Buenos Aires
And in Uruguay to the east.

There are always two that they talk of,
A stranger and a local guy.
It is always evening. The evening star
Shines in the evening sky.

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They have never seen each other's faces
Nor will they ever again;
The quarrel is not about money
Or the favors of a woman.

The stranger has heard tell of a man
Whose courage has won renown.
Now he has come to see for himself,
And searches all over town.

He asks him nicely to step outside
In a quiet, unthreatening voice:
They both know, and neither would wish
To bring shame on the house.

Now the knives flashed in the air,
Now the battle was joined.
Now a man lay still in the street
Without having made a sound.

They never met before that evening.
They will not meet again.
It was not greed that started it
And not the love of a woman.

No use in being more skillful,
No use in being more fit;
Always the one who dies is the one
Who went out looking for it.

All their lives the two men
Were living for that test.
Time has already erased their faces,—
Soon, their names erased.

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The Thing I Am

I have forgotten my name. I am not Borges
(Borges died at La Verde, under fire)
Nor am I Acevedo, dreaming of battle,
Nor my father, bending over his book
Or taking death as it came to him one morning,
Nor Haslam, puzzling out chapter and verse
Of Holy Scripture, far from Northumberland,
Nor Suarez, having to face the charge of lancers.
I am barely the shade cast by those shades.
Those intimate and convoluted shades
I am their memory, but also someone else,
The other who lived, like Dante, like all men,
Once in a great while in paradise
As well as in many mandatory hells.
I am the flesh and the face I do not see.
I am, at day's end, the submissive man
Who arranges, more or less characteristically,
The voices of the pure Castilian language
So as to tell the stories that exhaust
All that goes by the name of literature.
I am he who leafed through encyclopedias,
The ten o'clock scholar, hair now white or gray,
Prisoner of a houseful of letterless books
Who in the lengthening shadow tries to scan
A dread hexameter learned on the banks of the
Rhône,
One who armed with a few tags of Phedrus and Virgil
Imagines himself saving a world that flees
From the water and the fire of the Wrath to come.
The past hounds me with images.
I am the sudden memory of the realm
Of Magdeburg or of two runic characters
Or of a couplet by Angelus Silesius.
I am the man who knows no other solace
Than bringing to mind some long gone moment of joy.

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I am, at times, the joy, wholly undeserved.
I am he who knows he is no more than an echo,
He who wishes to die without a trace.
I am, perhaps, the one you are in sleep.
I am the thing I am. Shakespeare said it.
I am the one who outlives all the cowards
And fools that he has been.

NOTE: Parolles, a minor character in *All's Well That Ends Well*, endures a humiliation. Suddenly he is illumined by Shakespeare's light and speaks the words, "Captain I'll be no more / But I will eat and drink and sleep as soft / As captain shall. Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live." In the next-to-last line can be heard an echo of the tremendous name I AM THAT I AM. (It is Buber's understanding that we have here a cunning evasion by the Lord so as not to reveal His true and secret name to Moses.) Swift, on the eve of his death, wandered from room to room, mad and solitary, saying over and over, "I am that I am." Like the Creator, the creature is what he is, although with attributes.

The Moon

to María Kodama

There is so much lonliness in that gold.
The moon of every night is not the moon
That the first Adam saw.
The centuries
Of human wakefulness have left it brimming
With ancient tears. Look at it. It is your mirror.

—translated from the Spanish
by Robert Mezey

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The Inquisitor

I might have been a martyr. Instead I was
A scourge of martyrs, trying souls in fire.
To save my own soul, I tried tears and prayer,
Harsh discipline, the hairshirt and the taws.
What I observed in burnings at the stake
Was what my tongue decreed: the holy flames,
The bound and suffering flesh, the roar, the screams,
Death agonies, the stench of oily smoke.
Dead, I forget the men who groan and curse,
But I know all too well this vile remorse
Is but a crime I add to the earlier crime,
And both of which the steady wind of time
Shall sweep away—being longer than one's sin
Or one's contrition. I have worn them thin.

—translated from the Spanish
by Robert Mezey and Dick Barnes

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Dick Barnes

María Kodama

Into Miami at night then out over gulf island and jungle

We had traveled so fast that we arrived
on the right bank of the Río de la Plata
where much known to fame had taken place

A slender woman, pale face, fine eyes, her hair
nearly all turned white
she might have been the ghost of some great lady in a
Noh drama
Aoi no Uye come back in passionate serenity
we half thought she would rise, dance,
and as the chorus spoke her lines, explain:

My father came from Japan, my mother from
"the Orient"
as here we call Uruguay
With an old blind poet I studied a dead language
and I loved him
When deep in her age his mother died
I became his bride, companion and nurse
My beauty that has not withered
has never been beheld by a husband
He left no son nor daughter, only his poems and
prose
for me to care for
And because of all this many feel for me
great envy and hatred
A flower as fair as any
I am removed from the scheme of generation
Like the sleepy graceful flowers of the Recoleta, fit
Not to offend the dead, having no pride of life . . .

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Instead,
smiling shyly she recited verses she had learned,
how the old warrior bade the young turn loose their
horses,
drive them away, how he let his dear falcon
fly off into the forest

leofne fleogan
hafoc wiþ þæs holtes and *to þære hilde stop*
he stepped forward toward the fight

Mezey and I like wakis by our pillar, there
in Buenos Aires at the Hotel Presidente bar.

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Three Poems by Pam A. Parker

Brooklyn Crossing

The masts are mostly gone, Walt. Pleasure-sailors
ply the harbor, piloting fiberglass forty-footers
down from the North Shore, one at the wheel,
one to haul sail and sit, staring over the water's face.

A swimmer, strong and lucky, might make it,
cutting an angle across the current, ebb up, flood
down.
Jumpers, too, are rare, these days: a train is more
reliable,
that third, electrified rail, half-covered, always visible.

On the river, among the boats, you rode
the ferry low against the water's breast.
If you mean to stand in the same place today, old
man,
it's moved. I would not find you on the Brooklyn
boat,
but browsing over the east-facing rail
of the Staten Island Ferry.

Coming back, you stand in the docking end,
grasp the safety chain, hold the mass
of Wall Street towers in your encompassing gaze.

You know me, standing at a window twenty stories
up,
whether I recognize you or not.
Your curiosity seeks me out, its bare and ample limbs
embrace me.
There is that between us that lets me know you.

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Coup de Foudre

Sluice me, stop my breath—still my
life to this, my fist
taut, a hand of fingers feeds my
flight to here, to this.

Easy, nearly still my body is
my fist that fills,
loosely closed, its collar, bracelet,
captor cunt that feels
hot, a hood of blindness shorts my
sight, a glove of skin,
greasy throat a route where lightning
enters, offers twin
crucifixions: spitted flesh by
flesh made two in one,
knot a rosy crown, a bind of
ties against the bone.

Please me, take my hand completely,
dive, go deep, make
use, create the body sexed my hand
connects to, take
not a heartbeat less than all
the heart I hand you.

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History

Munich, December 6, 1919

I turned forty the year I wrote it
all down, every bit
I could remember:

the sex, the longing for it, the fear
when it neared and I
could not refuse it.

It frightened me to write, but I forced
myself through the words,
hoping to help. "It's

evidence," the assistant told me,
"undeniable
proof of our being

what we are, not as they would have us."
I was among the
first to testify,

writing my life for the *Institut*
Dr. Hirschfeld was
building in Berlin;

and many more, like and unlike me,
similarly told
their stories, building

a foundation from which we could reach
the law and change it,
teach the minds and hearts

filled with ignorance hatred feeds on,
open the way to
a free life, for all.

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Kenneth Rosen

Dürer's Four Witches

The truth is none of our business.
Our adolescent eye-at-the-keyhole rooting
In a sweetheart's soiled linen for a clue

To the day's dirt and its secretions is disgusting
And weird, and after awhile we lose interest
In the way novelist Saul Bellow's nostrils dilate

Going up an elevator ripe, as he's written,
As bananas with matrons, or Joyce imploring
Nora Barnacle to let him watch her do what she

Must firmly, finally, explain to him is none
Of his business, and last Friday a professor
From the U. of Minnesota complained the fable

Alice in Wonderland an imperialist treatise,
Inadvertent or not, a vade mecum on how never
To conquer or explore, all that reckless falling,

Ingestion and size change being mainly erotic
Mockery, though Carroll's kinkiness and mirth was
None of our business, sexist of course, and further,

How Lord Acton, during a Victorian campaign
Against syphilis examined with the speculum vaginas
Of two hundred London prostitutes in as many

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Minutes, which was abusive and none of his business,
Why didn't he examine the men, her resentment keen
A century after Acton's marathon, honed by his jokes

And the privacy component of her self-esteem.
In Dürer's engraving of four women standing
Haunch to haunch in a marble vestibule, a toilet,

Lips mirthlessly sealed, or in horror apart, frank
Middle-aged nakedness burgeoning with mandolin
hams
And stomachs, crab-apple breasts, valentine cheeks

And chinless discontent, genes that gave us
Meryl Streep's earnestness half a millenium later,
Their cold, raw arena of aroma and atmosphere

Of kinetic menace, is none of our business.
A demon bares its fangs over sawgrass fire
In a mirror or door. A skull lies underfoot,

Ignored, doubtlessly male, and a bone of thigh.
They are witches, Dürer says, these mothers and lovers
Of our middle life who give us each day our earth

As it is in heaven. One wears her hair in a harp
Like the back of a wicker chair, another's in a scarf,
A third in a bun, the last in a wreath of braids slowly

Coming undone. They look grave. Buttocks so large
On such slender limbs inspired our battle-ax
metaphor.
This is 1497. They are why in '92 Columbus sailed

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The ocean blue. No one can live on butter without
salt,
On chicken boiled with onion, carrot and celery,
But no other spice, jewel or perfume without

Losing their grip on life or their appetite, not
In Nuremberg, not forever. But why they are proud
Of their bodies' realities, toll of child-bearing

And housework, cleaning, mending, making and
eating
In boredom, yet pluck their eyebrows and fortify
Themselves with romantic stories, is none of our
business.

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Four Poems by James Laughlin

The Figure in the Stone

is visible to the sculptor
but it is invisible to me

studying the marble before
he takes up his hammer and

chisel the sculptor envisa-
ges the lineaments of a ner-

eid one of the sea nymphs of
the Aegean is it Thetis I

ask him or is it Galatea is
it the mother of Achilles the

hero of Troy or she who by
trickery was wed to the mons-

trous cyclops Polyphemus the
stone will tell me as I work

it as I cut parts of it away
he answers when I have fin-

ished the form will declare
her name to some it is grant-

ed to see what is within but
to others alas it is not.

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Don't Try to Explain

The mind of a lover is a labyrinth
of false starts and miscalculations

something said was not intended in
the way it was heard then a wrong

turning was made in the maze words
of another person are given a false

interpretation and a passageway ends
in a blank wall an intonation mis-

understood and steps must be retraced
they say that the word labyrinth first

meant a double-headed axe remember that
love cuts both ways before you explain.

Odi et Amo

The hate began a few months after
the blissful wedding he discov-

ered that she had concealed a part
of her personality during the court-

ship (a rigidity that she must have
her way over him) and she discovered

that he was rather a pompous ass
there were little (at first joking)

criticisms on both sides then sulks
short arguments and then long ones

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that could last for days but between
rough times there were good times re-

turns to kindness and even to tender-
ness there was a second honeymoon in

Italy but it ended in a scrap over
nothing in Verona at the Caffé Dante

she wanted Orvieto and he wanted Bar-
dolino they ordered two bottles and

drank hardly any of either in cold
silence
        at about that time they moved

to Santa Barbara and I lost touch with
them I heard they never had children

but didn't separate they couldn't let
go of one another they went on hating

and loving all their lives odi et amo.

Long & Languorous

A whole stolen afternoon before us
no hurry no haste savoring every

sensation begin perhaps with mimi-
cry of memories of adolescence

what you learned from the boy next
door what the lady who was divorced

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taught me no hurry no haste how
is it that lovemaking from long ago

can return so vividly we can still
feel certain touches hear certain

tones of voice even remember some
of the words exchanged making love

is cumulative nothing of it that
was good is really lost and yet

there can always be discoveries
little hidden paths to pleasure

no haste no hurry time for a mo-
ment's doze between enlacements

time even for a bit of joking be-
cause there is that aspect of the

ridiculous in coupling better it
all be soft and slow gentle and

generous as our afternoon speeds
on its way long and languorous.

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J.D. McClatchy

Proust in Bed

Through the peephole he could see a boy
Playing patience on the huge crimson sofa.
There was the turkey, the second-best
Chairs, the old chipped washstand, all his dead parents'
Things donated months ago
"To make an unfortunate
Crowd happy" at the Hôtel
Marigny, Albert's brothel,
Warehouse of desires
And useless fictions—

For one of which he turned to Albert
And nodded, he'd have that one at cards, the soon-
To-be footman or fancy butcher.
He'd rehearsed his questions in the corridor.
Did you kill an animal
Today? An ox? Did it bleed?
Did you touch the blood? Show me
Your hands, let me see how you . . .
(Judgment Day angel
Here to separate

The Good from the Bad, to weigh the soul . . .
Soon enough you'll fall from grace and be nicknamed
Pamela the Enchantress or Tool
Of the Trade. Silliness is the soul's sweetmeat.)
One after another now,
Doors closed on men in bed with
The past, it was three flights to
His room, the bedroom at last,

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The goal obtained and
So a starting-point

For the next forbidden fruit—the taste
Of apricots and ripe gruyère is on the hand
He licks—the next wide-open mouth
To slip his tongue into like a communion
Wafer. The consolation
Of martyrs is that the God
For whom they suffer will see
Their wounds, their wildernesses.
He's pulled a fresh sheet
Up over himself,

As if waiting for his goodnight kiss
While the naked boy performs what he once did
For himself. It's only suffering
Can make us all more than brutes, the way that boy
Suffers the silvery thread
To be spun inside himself,
The snail-track left on lilac,
Its lustrous mirror-writing,
The mysterious
Laws drawn through our lives

Like a mother's hand through her son's hair . . .
But again nothing comes of it. The signal
Must be given, the small bedside bell.
He needs his parents to engender himself,
To worship his own body
As he watches them adore
Each other's. The two cages
Are brought in like the holy
Sacrament. Slowly
The boy unveils them.

The votive gaslights seem to flicker.
Her dying words were "What have you done to me?"

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In each cage a rat, and each rat starved
For three days, each rat furiously circling
The pain of its own hunger.
Side by side the two cages
Are placed on the bed, the foot
Of the bed, right on the sheet
Where he can see them
Down the length of his

Body, helpless now as it waits there.
The rats' angry squealing sounds so far away.
He looks up at his mother—touches
Himself—at her photograph on the dresser,
His mother in her choker
And her heavy silver frame.
The tiny wire-mesh trap doors
Slide open. At once the rats
Leap at each other,
Claws, teeth, the little

Shrieks, the flesh torn, torn desperately,
Blood spurting out everywhere, hair matted, eyes
Blinded with the blood. Whichever stops
To eat is further torn. The half-eaten rat
Left alive in the silver
Cage the boy—he keeps touching
Himself—will stick over and
Over with a long hatpin.
Between his fingers
He holds the pearl drop.

She leans down over the bed, her veil
Half-lifted, the scent of lilac on her glove.
His father hates her coming to him
Like this, hates her kissing him at night like this.

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Molly Bendall

Spring Sale at Bendel's

for Florine Stettheimer (1871–1944)

Lack-luster friends and acquaintances

We told them these were our "long, empty
hours" and that we'd nap or primp,
but instead we rose to all the trappings
and left in a whiff of musk.
I coaxed my friend
to our bursting floral aisles,
our shady map of continents.
We found the depths of the store
without them. Tracing icy beads
and soothing a feathered edge,
we decided—though not out loud—
that we could be unfaithful here,
carry out a scheme as chilling
as espionage and convene with those
just minutes known.

"Almost Florentine," she said,
"the lusting after mauves and insignia."
Then we caught our admirer at the
doorway,
camouflaging himself,
holding forth the fray of the city.
We needed to find a flame
for his anemic character, since
it was always Mondayish for him.
"You be the . . . agent," she said,
"I see you in angora
and a loose, low waist."

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"He'd think I looked like
a royal vase," I said,
"we can't look as if we're nesting."

Marooned

Why bring anyone here?
We only wanted a cake to trim,
a dress with little Eiffel Towers
on it. "I *could* say he loves you
in your bodice of bleeding hearts."
But she'd already gone off
to another level, called off
necessary cares, pedaled them away
like old neighborhoods.
I lost her on a barge with a message
meant for her Moorish idol.
Following her lead, I remembered
a ridge near my coast
with an acre of Spanish moss
and a priveleged appearance
to which I'd grown accustomed.
It was just another years-off-vacation,
tended to and remote like
my great aunt's sordid past.

Recovery and flight

And here, we got to know ourselves
ravished by salve and gauze,
until we saw our way back
to our predicaments,
but not before we stood
on the second balcony where the store
below
was an upturned sea—veiny scraps,
sleek sashes, and backwards clouds.
We threw off our garb and rushed
into oath making; we pooled
our fevers with the creamy oysters

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and the staircase that serpentined
into the breathless floor beneath us.

Florine shows up

How do we contend with all this—so sexless
and fully sexed?
We looked to her in prodigal awe.
She stood backlit at the threshold.
Dragonfly antennae, acute and fragile,
sprouted from her hat. Appropriately pagan.
She drifted by, acclimated
to the spumey clutter of the place.
The weight of her body was almost
gone, taken over by a flight of malaise
or what we called her gypsy phase.

Our scenery was always rimmed in pink,
until someone's fame was questioned
or the curtain from another era fell.
And we were depicted, shaded with doubts,
in these rooms, in their twilit arrestedness.
We needed her to bear witness
to the ribboned spokes of our yearnings
and to ask her,
"What can we do as often as dress?"

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Platte River

Rick Bass

Shaw used to be a model and is still beautiful, fierce and timid both, like a coyote or a wild dog—more beautiful, in that way, than when she modeled. Harley is strange-looking, as plain as butter, huge, and believes, in his heart, that with his ragged dress, his half-beard, his falling-out hair and his badger's temper, that he makes Shaw feel older, less beautiful, less whole. Less than what she used to be. Harley tells Shaw this, to hear her deny it, and she does deny it, and keeps denying it, all the way up until the time she packs to move out, saying that she feels older, no longer beautiful, no longer whole . . . but that it's not Harley's doing . . .

Harley's forty-one. Shaw is thirty-eight. Old enough to have lived full lives, and yet they have not even started.

Shaw takes her time leaving, this time, which frightens Harley. Usually she bolts, leaving in the night, hitchhiking, since they have only one old truck between them, which runs only infrequently. But this time Shaw has told Harley of her fears, her feelings, calmly, matter-of-factly, rather than just fleeing. She's already met with the bank

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officer in the small town nearest where they live. It's an hour's drive down out of Canada, along a one-lane cliff road, to get to that town; Shaw and Harley have a mailbox in the States, in northern Montana, but where they live is over the line, ten miles up into Canada, up an old logging road, in an abandoned hunting lodge, large and fairy-tale airy, with the stuffed heads of deer and elk, moose and bear staring down at them from all the walls—ancient heads, animals shot fifty and sixty years ago. It's such a fairy-tale existence, with the huge, stone-circled fireplaces, the huge bedroom—everything oversized, as if a giant had once lived in the lodge—that Harley often feels he and Shaw have died and are living some sort of afterlife, separate from the world.

Then Harley realizes that's the problem, that he loves that empty, echoing, ringing feeling—being a man, and cherishing aging, but Shaw is terrified of it. To live in the wilderness is lovely, but to grow old in the wilderness, not so lovely. . . .

Shaw has taken out a loan from the bank down in Montana, using the silk scarves that she paints as collateral. She stretches the silk between sawhorses in the backyard, and then, wearing a big straw hat to protect her face from the thin mountain sun, she paints abstract patterns across the silks before hemming the edges and sewing them into things—scarves, mostly, but also skirts, blouses, ties. The car she's taken the loan on is an old Subaru. Shaw parks it in the backyard and paints that, too—autumn red and lichen green, swirling.

"I need a car that'll get around in the snow," she tells Harley. It's April—the month it always is when she leaves—not during the long winter, but right after. Like an animal coming to its senses, Harley thinks; like an animal waking up.

It's late April, almost May, Harley thinks, and she's talking about snow. That means she'll be gone longer than two or three weeks. November, at least. Maybe longer.

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Shaw cries sometimes, after they make love. Harley asks her why.

"I just think about how sad it's going to make you, when I leave," Shaw says.

They still make love often—in the woods, walking through the sun—tiger stripes of sunlight falling across their bodies, and the snow-melt river hurtling past. Shaw gazes into Harley's eyes during love—into the back of his eyes, into his *cells,* Harley thinks—but then she bursts into tears the second it is over, and it's the end of beauty, and nothing but semen, cooling.

It's just a restlessness—but it's strong.

Leaving him, she thinks, will kill him. They're friends. She's restless, she's hungry, and she's tired—mostly frightened—and Shaw feels disloyal. She remembers how he was when he hurt his knee and had to leave the league—how they wouldn't let him play football anymore: how much he needed her, then; how they moved up to these woods. Shaw can leave the lover part of the relationship—that's her choice, she feels. But leaving the friendship part—just cutting loose and drifting away from that, too . . . She feels guilty, almost to the point of feeling anchored—drowning—going down at sea, with chains wrapped around her body, around her neck.

Fish, swimming through her hair.

It's why she's taking such a long time leaving. She's never left a friend before. His strength, trustworthiness . . . if he were handsome, she thinks, she would hate him, rather than loving him: for trying to hold her there with that. But she can't explain this to him. He thinks she's saying it to make him feel better—preparing him for when she does it: leaves.

This *planned* leaving—it's new, it's curtains, it's the end of the line for Harley, he thinks. The way Shaw's applying for that loan, the way she packs carefully, each day, one more box—buttons, fabric, paints, brushes, winter clothes. . . . It's nothing like the usual (once a month) mad leavings whereupon Shaw and Harley would get in

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a shrieking fight, names would be called, names would be called back, and Shaw, despondent, would burn her bridges, would race out into the night, and, if it were snowing, would flounder across the field, running high-kneed through the drifts, across the meadow, and then down the lonely, icy road. Harley would rush upstairs and, in his bull rage, his anguish at having lost her, at having not been good enough—at having been baited into a fight, rather than being gentle and letting the name-calling drift past him—would begin butting his head against the walls of the log cabin, bellowing with pain.

This, in the winter.

When he had finished beating his head against the walls—when he was able, finally, to begin to feel the pain—the drumming, mad blood-pulse between his ears and through his head, throbbing, but slowing, then the giant three-story cabin would be immense in its emptiness, the loneliness of it. Harley would remember how short life was, but how long it was, too, and with his bad knees he'd hobble down the stairs, around and around their boxy spiral and out the front door, and—as if running for his life, as if believing that each time she leaves—each time—will surely be the last, that she will not calm down, will not return or allow herself to be caught but will keep running, down the road and then off the road and into the woods, up over Roderick Buttes and then higher, up over Lost Horse Mountain and into the next valley, and then over into the one beyond that, running to Alaska, perhaps . . .

They race through the woods: always, it seems, at night, as if there is some dark biochemical stirring, some urge toward destruction when the light fades and the woods around them grow gloomy and then dark—Shaw bolting from the center of the empty road she's walking down when she hears him coming, bolting into the woods, into the trees—and like a hound after a fox, like a wolf chasing a deer, Harley runs, then. They both zig

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and zag, leaping logs, running through the forest, and when Harley catches up with her (feeling, strangely, a terror even greater than hers, when he corners her—exhausted, both of them panting, Shaw with her back up against a stand of trees, half bent over, crouching, the way a moose will do when bayed by a pack of wolves), Harley doesn't try to calm her with words, with promises or apologies or forgiveness, but instead he picks her up (she struggles and tosses her head back and forth, but doesn't bite him, and he doesn't feel her fists, and finally she goes limp, and begins crying, her hair tangled and hiding her face) and he carries Shaw out of the woods and back up the deserted gravel road to their cabin—to what used to be their cabin—theirs, not simply hers or his—and to what Harley hopes will be once again.

He lays her—if it's fall, or winter, or even cold spring—in front of the fireplace, which is always glimmering and hissing with low coals. Harley covers her with a blanket. Shaw turns her head away from him: stares into the fire, hating him, hating everything, knowing only that she feels trapped and must run: hating him for trying to control her and protect her.

Bears in the night, in the autumn, or winter's forty-below blizzards, it makes no difference; when Shaw wants to run, she runs.

In the morning, after the sleepless, hateful night, things are better, though rocky for a day and a half, sometimes even two days—rocky, and raw. Shaw paints new scarves, down in the basement if it's cold out, or in the backyard if it's late spring or summer or fall—painting wildly, fierce-colored lovely abstract slashes on shimmering silk, teardrops and razor-stripes of unheralded colors, colors exceeding even the golds and blues and fireweed reds of the country's late summer—painting bent over the silks, which are stretched tight between the sawhorses, wearing a big straw hat, painting straight lipped, furious, about to cry—painting like a madwoman, unsure if she wants to stay or leave—wanting to leave for

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her next journey, her new journey, but afraid to, and furious, no longer at big dumb Harley for trying to hold her but at herself, for being frightened. Shaw takes it out on the silks, painting to keep from going crazy, those days after she's been recaptured, and Harley feels as if he's used the last faint glimmers of her love for him as a lure, a bait with which to bring her back, with which to hold her, one last time; always, he feels it's the last time.

Later in the day, when the afternoon sun is warmer, Shaw hangs her newly painted scarves on the side of the barn, tacks them to the boards as if they're the hides of animals, and they flutter brightly in the wind, snapping and drying in the sun, four or five of them at a time blowing in the wind, so colorful, so bright and shimmering—so *wonderful*—that to anyone passing (though no one does), it would, *must,* seem as if everything's right, as if there's only peace, as if there's no restlessness in the world.

This time: Shaw packing the boxes slowly, Shaw cleaning the house thoroughly—*scrubbing* it, even the farthest corners, to preface her departure—Shaw moving methodically, logically, gathering her courage steadily so that it will last. This time it terrifies Harley. He knows that empty-cabin feeling is rising to meet him again, and that this time he won't be able to do anything about it when she leaves.

If she doesn't run, how can he catch her?

Harley feels his power being drained from him. He feels Shaw growing stronger. The scarves flap and dry in the wind, glistening at first while wet, but then drying: immensely, heartbreakingly beautiful.

While Shaw goes down into Montana and then Idaho to look for work and a new place to live, Harley flies out to northern Michigan to visit an old friend of his from college, a teammate, Willis, who was never drafted,

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never played for money, but perhaps should have—a small, churlish running back, nicknamed "The Wolverine," whom Harley spent three years blocking for, protecting.

Willis—the Wolverine—teaches English. He's not erudite, but he's learned the same plays—*Hamlet, The Tempest, The Cherry Orchard*—over and over again, and he can present them to the burning young students—the best students in art from around the country—in a way that is acceptable to them. They like the Wolverine's dark looks, his distant, permanent scowl, which is often mistaken for an artist's brooding but which is really simply the scowl of a wolverine—and they like his short, wide, muscular, artist's body: to them, he looks like a paragraph.

It's sort of a scam that the Wolverine has been able to hire his old blocking buddy to come out to the art school and talk about football: fifteen hundred dollars for the weekend. Things are so crazy at home that Harley would do it for free, just to get out of the house, but he's glad for the money. He thinks how if he were married he would give the government half for taxes, and then the other half for alimony, after the divorce, leaving him nothing—nothing—for his work.

It's wicked and greedy, he knows, to think this way, but it's what he's thinking, and he can't help it, and it gives him a small, stupid solace—for once—that Shaw wouldn't marry him, back when he asked.

The Wolverine picks Harley up at the Traverse City airport late in the day; Harley's been traveling for a day and a night to get out of the woods: driving down out of Canada, slipping across into the States, and on down to Spokane—then taking a staggering number of cross-connections and route-around flights, each one moving (albeit obliquely) closer to the destination, to the center that is the Wolverine's own small lair, also on the Canadian line, up in northern Michigan—flying in a hydro-

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plane, the last leg of the journey (Harley's big legs, big knees pummeling the seat of the passenger in front of him as they cross the open, choppy air in that ancient plane).

The Wolverine trots out to the runway to meet Harley when the plane lands, and the two men exchange high fives, bump asses, twirl and dance the way they did fifteen years earlier, with no sadness or parody whatsoever—frozen in the moment, in time, in their happiness at being together. All the other passengers, all the other people in the small airport, and the pilots, even, are looking down and watching the two bulky men—one tall, one short—bump and dance on the runway.

It's windy, gusting up to fifty miles an hour, and it's still winter in northern Michigan. The wind catches the Wolverine's hat, lifts it from his head, and hurls it, tumbling, racing, down the runway. Spirited away, it's moving fifty, sixty yards at a clip, farther and farther out of reach—gone so fast that they don't even consider chasing it. The two men just watch it for a second and then laugh and head for the terminal with their arms around each other's shoulders, to get out of the wind: Harley limping only slightly from the day's cramped travels.

They drive the last fifteen miles to the campus in Willis's old rusted-out Toyota—Harley can see the road rushing beneath them through holes in the floorboard, can hear the wind whistling up into the car. It looks like winter: pearl gray sky, still no leaves on the trees and patches of dirty snow, ovals of snow, like great dirty black-and-white leeches creeping across the land . . .

Fifteen hundred dollars, Harley thinks. He feels like he shouldn't have gone off and left Shaw. It's green already, down low in their valley, in southern Alberta and over into northern Montana.

"I feel like I'm slumming," Harley says. "I feel like they just want to gawk. I mean, none of them will even have heard of me. I feel like they just want to say, 'We touched an ex-football player; we had a hunk of meat

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speaking on our little campus this week. We're different, we're *out there;* other art schools bring in fay poets and piano tuners, but we bring in meat, to broaden our horizons.' "

Harley's picking at his fingernails. "I feel like they just want to gawk," he says.

The Wolverine nods, then shrugs. "Some of them will," he says. "But they're good kids. Give them a break."

The Wolverine and Harley turn off the main road and drive down a dirt road that is soft and dusty, and pass through a forest of bare-limbed birches. They come out of the bottom and drive up into pines. Harley can see a lake through the trees. Willis is taking him to the cottage where Harley will be staying.

"Just talk about football," the Wolverine says. "Talk about what you know. These kids are *insatiable.* They want to know about everything—I mean, everything," the Wolverine says. "Give them the Nietzsche stuff, the van Gogh, about how one must be one's own horse. Or that one that Coach Shea used to give us."

Harley smiles. *"Hit, hit, hit,"* he says, looking out the window. The lake is whitecapping. Trees line it, all around the shore. It's a large lake.

"We'll go fishing tonight, if that's okay with you," says the Wolverine. "Me and you, and a couple of the other teachers. They're good guys and want to meet you."

The wind's rocking the little car. Harley looks over at the Wolverine, and it's not like they're kids anymore, or even young men. The two men can see the age in each other's eyes, in each other's faces. But it's still a good feeling, an exciting one, a new one—as if there's still much country to be covered and plenty of strength left with which to cover it.

"Steelhead," the Wolverine says. "We'll have some burgers and some pie and coffee, over at my house. I want you to meet my wife and little girl. Then we'll go

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out to the Platte River and catch some steelhead. I've got all the gear you'll need."

"Super," says Harley—delighted to have something to take his mind off his pain. He imagines Shaw packing one more box, even at that moment: arranging it neatly, packing it and repacking it: getting it just right. "Wonderful," Harley says.

"God it's great to see you," the Wolverine says, grabbing Harley's big hand and shaking it back and forth, squeezing it. Harley remembers all the enemy tacklers he cut down trying to protect Willis, trying to keep them from getting to him, and grins back.

"It's great to be here," Harley says.

"I'll pick you back up in an hour," Willis says. "I'll go get you a license and get everything rounded up—we'll wade where the river goes into the lake—and give you time to freshen up. Shit, it's great that you're here," he says, shaking Harley's hand once more.

Harley climbs out of the little car and shoulders his overnight bag, waves good-bye, then walks up the steps of the cottage. Harley can hear the wind slapping the water against the shore, crashing the waves against the rock shoreline; even when he's inside, he can hear that sound.

It's a tiny cottage: no television, no electricity, just a bed, a desk and a bathroom. Harley sits down on the tiny bed and looks out the brightly washed window at the lake and listens to it. The room is lonelier in its smallness than an empty mansion would be. There's nothing to do but watch the lake. It's Shaw who should be here, not him, he thinks. These kids don't want to know about football.

There's no one out. Harley imagines that they are all in a cafeteria somewhere, eating, laughing, being young, talking about flutes and poetry and vases—olden shit. He watches the lake for a long time. The sun through the window and the sound of the waves is making him sleepier than he's ever been, but as an exercise in discipline he tries to stay awake, refuses to lie down, not even

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for a minute or two, and finally, as if it is the thing he has been watching for, he sees another person, someone other than himself. It's a young woman walking her yellow Labrador on a leash. She's walking the dog around the lake, walking with her head down, and walking slowly—a sad woman, or girl, Harley can tell, and now, instead of watching the lake, he watches her, until she disappears into the trees.

He's napping hard when Willis knocks on his door. In the dream Harley was having, he was hitting his head against the log cabin again, faster and faster, after Shaw had left again, but then he hears the Wolverine's voice—"Hey, Harley, it's me"—and Willis is poking his head in the door, saying, "Wake up, Heine-Man." It's one of Harley's nicknames from college, due to the wideness of his girth. Harley sits up slowly, stunned, wondering how long Shaw's been gone, and wondering where he, Harley, is. For a moment, it seems that his life with Shaw, and the dream of banging his head against the wall, is what's real, and that Willis, with his head halfway through the door, grinning, and the afterlife-lulling washes of the waves, the heavy forest right outside the window, is what the dream is. The sun is down behind the trees, the light has left the room, Harley's chilled, and he wants to be home—but fifteen hundred dollars is fifteen hundred dollars, and he rises from the bed slowly, lumbers into the bathroom, splashes water on his face, and they're off: back out of the cottage and into the Wolverine's car.

The Wolverine seems, to Harley, to be a little more fidgety, a little more *restless,* than Harley remembered from school, but then Harley decides that's to be expected: that it's late in the winter, that spring's long overdue, but that maybe Willis is unhappy, too, being a jock among the effetes.

"It's my tenth anniversary, man," Willis says, grinning almost maniacally, holding the steering wheel with both hands. Harley notices how tense Willis's shoulders are,

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how his trapezius muscles seem to be riding even a little higher than usual, and remembers the masseuse who used to come to their dorm after games at their small college in Ohio: and how, in the pros, there had not been such a masseuse, and how he'd been disappointed by that fact. Dixie, he thinks, trying to remember. Harley feels like a fossil, this was all so long ago, his life buried in stone, beneath mountains of rock and earth. Harley gets the feeling that "Congratulations" isn't the thing Willis wants him to say, but he says it anyway, it's all there is to say.

"She won't be at your talk tomorrow evening," Willis says, apologetically, but also with true concern for his wife, which touches Harley, and then reminds him of Shaw, bringing him pain—a tight sharp twist in his chest that could, and perhaps one day would, be a heart attack. "She's got that winter depression thing," Willis says, holding his hand out and making it flutter, like a crippled, wounded bird. Willis says it with concern, but also the way he's making his hand dip and dive as he drives strikes Harley as funny, and he laughs but then is mortified to see Willis scowl—it's no laughing matter for him—and the subject is dropped. Harley stares out the window, crimson, and watches for deer in the late-day light, watches for deer running through the forest the way they do back home, in Canada.

"This teaching," Willis says after a while. "I've been doing it fifteen years," he says. Harley looks over at him and thinks that Willis still looks to be in okay shape: nothing like he was in college, but still probably stronger and faster than maybe ninety-eight percent of the rest of the world, and wasn't that enough—after fifteen years, shouldn't that be more than enough?

Though Harley knows it isn't: they both do. To have been there—in perfect shape, perfect condition—and then *not* to be there . . .

You're either there on the peak of perfection, the peak of strength, thinks Harley, or you're not.

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"I just feel like *driving,*" says Willis. "I just feel like letting you out at the house and *going* somewhere—anywhere—just driving, for days."

Harley nods, and watches the woods race past. They're almost at the Wolverine's house, which is at the other end of the lake. They ride the rest of the way in silence: the Wolverine wrapped up in the idea of a long flight, his eyes luminous with the thought of it, his good humor restored, and Harley, picking at his thumbnail, trying to think of what he'll say tomorrow, trying to figure out a way to take home the fifteen hundred with pride rather than guilt. Trying to figure out why Shaw's unhappy, why she always wants to leave when she doesn't have anything to run to—trying to figure out what's wrong with him that makes her just want to run away. Harley's read and heard about biological clocks, but to him sometimes it seems like more of a fuse than a clock.

"Jack and Lois'll be there," Willis says. "Jack teaches with me. They're great. Jack's funny, a nice guy." He clears his throat. "And Nick and Shellie will be there. Nick Bozaine. He's a poet. Jack and Nick and you and me are going fishing. Jack's a poet too, but he's normal. Nick's, well, Nick is . . ." Willis flutters his hand again and looks at Harley with what almost seems to be warning, or apology.

"Nick's a sweet guy, a prince of a guy—the rarest man there is—but he gets sad," Willis says. "He's manic-depressive, and he's in the middle of a big one, right now." Willis shakes his head. "He tried to kill himself once," he says.

"How," says Harley, flatly, trying not to show his fear, or his anger.

"Garage," says Willis. "Left the car running in the garage one winter, and lay down in the front seat, wrapped up in a blanket and went to sleep. His ex-wife—his first one—came home and got him to the hospital." Willis sighs, as he pulls into the driveway. "Maybe my best friend here on campus," he says. "Sweetest man

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who ever walked the face of the earth. Been married four times, and he's only thirty-five years old."

The Wolverine's home, which he is renting from the Academy, is beautiful, charming. It's nestled back in the trees, off by itself with toys strewn in the yard. When they get out of the car—bats flitting through the trees, in the heavy dusk—a golden retriever comes leaping across the yard and rolls itself, in a crude cross-body block, at Harley's feet. Harley bends down and pats the dog. There are tricycles in the yard and a Hula-Hoop, and some little girls' bicycles and a deflated soccer ball. The porch light's on, yellow, with a few mayflies bruising themselves against its glow, rising and dancing—the Wolverine pauses, going up the steps, and watches the hatch with a fisherman's eyes, a thousand miles away, and when Harley steps into the house he's frightened for a second because all he can see is a great wall of water, gunmetal gray water, whitecapping, rolling toward him. It's like he's stepped off the edge of the world, but then Harley realizes it's just a huge bay window, the largest he's ever seen—the entire back wall of the house is one immense sheet of glass, hanging right out over the lake. Seated on couches in the foreground, as if beneath a big movie screen, just watching the lake, are all the people he will meet: Jack and Lois, Nick and Shellie, and Claudia—the Wolverine's wife—and their little girl, Jamie.

Harley watches, his pulse still racing from the fright of it, and still off balance from the dreaminess of it, as Claudia turns and rises, comes forward to greet him, to shake his hand. She's smiling weakly but genuinely, and Harley feels guilty, intruding upon her personal illness at the end of the long winter, forcing her to be cheerful. The little girl, Jamie, comes flying across the room, launches herself at Harley's bulk and gives him a thigh hug, hurling herself into him as if trying to tackle him.

"You're Daddy's *friend,*" she cries, swinging around Harley's tree legs. "I am Jamie!"

Harley meets Jack—sturdy (though not in the manner

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of Harley or Willis, the Wolverine), bearded, red faced, as if from a bottle of schnapps. Jack's as cheerful as a drugstore Santa Claus, but quiet—and Lois, who is a fashion model, one-quarter Cherokee, is as cheerful and honest and straight as Jack. Another model, Harley thinks, and is reminded, again, of Shaw. Then he meets Nick, who's ghost-white pale—a long winter—tall, gaunt, suffering. Nick offers a weak, friendly smile as he rises to shake Harley's hand. Nick's vivacious wife, his fourth wife, Shellie, who's perhaps an inch or two over five feet, who looks strong, who looks furious with energy and ideas, rises to shake Harley's hand too.

Claudia has made cherry pie, and she cuts into it and serves it to the men and to Lois. Shellie's dieting, though she's as tiny as a fairy already. Everyone stands around eating the pie and watching night fall over the lake. Everyone's within two or three years of being forty, all of them on the low side of it, and Willis can't go wrong with the music he puts on the CD player: the Stones, Dylan, the Eagles . . . . Their likes in music are the most predictable thing about them.

Nick's eating anything he can get his hands on, to keep from talking, Harley can tell—loading up on chips, olives, pie, cookies. The women are talking about everything, not having seen each other in a day or two. Willis, the Wolverine, stands by the stereo and looks tired, even exhausted, but pleased, and Jack's eyes twinkle as he talks to Nick and Willis about the year's luck thus far in steelhead fishing, and about how frigid cold and windy it'll be, and about how late they'll be out, all night, and how he hopes they'll catch a fish tonight.

Harley tries to listen, grinning, but Jamie's pulling on his arm, wanting to show him her room: her hamster, her aquarium, pictures of her friends . . . . Harley leaves the den and the conversation of adults and feels, two thousand miles away, Shaw slipping off of the side of an iceberg, calving, he remembers it's called, feels their lives together cleaving and sloughing away, falling over

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the cliff, sliding away, landing with a giant splash in the night, sinking . . . . He would have given ten years of his life with her, for her to be with him tonight, to have seen the lake rolling in straight toward that bay window, and to meet all these new people, all these friends of the Wolverine, who are so totally accepting of him, and who are taking him—the men—fishing, later in the night.

Jamie's selling raffle tickets in conjunction with her school circus. Harley asks her if he'll win an elephant, and Jamie squeals, falls over on her bed laughing and shrieking. Her eyes are rolling back with hyperactivity, and Harley knows enough about children to realize he's not making Claudia's job any easier, that Jamie's got to start calming down for the end of the day rather than getting wound up. But Harley can't help it, he wants to see how much energy this child's got, and he sits down on the bed beside her and says, "A gorilla . . . I want to win a gorilla, to take back on the plane with me"—and Jamie shrieks even louder and sits up, pummeling her legs against the side of the bed. Her face is red with laughter, and tears are in her eyes, she's clapping her hands, she's so delighted to have a new friend, and Claudia, with a beautiful calm, sticks her head in the door and gives Jamie a nice-mother look, and whispers, "Ssshh . . . Calm *down* . . . Ssshhh," and Harley wonders how long Claudia's had the winter-sickness—if it came on in December, or January, or February . . .

He wonders if it will go away quickly: overnight, with the first sunny, warm day, or slowly, gradually, and he wonders if there are ever cases of it where, one year, it doesn't go away at all. It just stays.

"The pie was delicious," Harley says, which is the truth. He wants to tell her something else, something significant (he thinks of his lecture tomorrow, and gropes—this is a woman, a beautiful woman, and he does not think she would appreciate the old words of his and Willis's coach, *Hit, hit, hit*) but the pie is all he can come up with. The pie, and Jamie's thrilled happiness: *Jamie's*

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happiness, if not Claudia's—and Claudia smiles (that strong-but-weak, heartbreaking, polite, for-guests-only smile) and tells Jamie to "Sshh" again, and Jamie gets down one of her books. Harley thinks at first she wants him to read to her, but Jamie wants to read to *him.*

They sit very quietly, as Jamie reads to Harley. Harley can hear the adults talking happily in the next room, speaking among themselves with a tired, day's-end relief, like outlaws holed up in a cave after a hard day's ride, having given the posse the slip.

Jack comes in and listens to the end of Jamie's story and strokes the top of her head. "My Uncle Jack," Jamie explains, pointing a thumb to yet another of her friends, and Jack smiles, and says to Harley, "Do you do much hunting up in Canada?"

"A little," says Harley, glancing worriedly at Jamie, not wanting to upset her: still not sure of his footing in this new land, not sure if he's among brutes or effetes, or in some transition land where the two overlap and co-exist. Jack grins and says, "I started bowhunting last year," and then Jack, who'd been previously almost silent—grinning all the time, but responding only when spoken to—begins talking so fervently about hunting deer that everyone in the next room begins to listen and to drift toward Jamie's room. Jack doesn't notice, and he keeps on talking about how he got eight deer last season, how he was out in the woods every single day, about camouflage, about scent . . .

It's as if he's rising from a dream, or a great depth, when Jack looks up and sees that everyone's gathered around him and is listening, and smiling.

"What?" he says, stopping his story. "What's the big deal? What?"

"You," says Lois, laughing. "Doing all that *talking.*" Jack shrugs, blushes, and grins, and says to Harley, "Don't listen to them. I talk plenty."

"I thought this was a la-de-da school," Harley says. "You guys are talking about hunting and fishing like

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you're the last of the Mohicans. This is not what I'd expected," he says, and Jamie giggles, for no reason, and the women smile.

The Wolverine looks smug, pleased. "Ah, it's just the three of us," he says, waving his hand toward the front door, toward the night. "The rest are all fairies. We're all we've got," he says, and Nick and Jack look down and smile, both pleased and embarassed by the statement.

Coffee is made, and everyone goes back and sits by the big window, watching the stars and watching the lake—watching the moon shine, broken, on its windy waves.

"A sub went down there yesterday," Claudia says to Harley, "the day before you got here. They just pulled the bodies out today."

"A sub?" says Harley.

"Submarine," says Shellie, nodding. "These two guys from Traverse City—engineers—built one in their garage, and took it out on the lake, took it down to, what"—she looks over at Nick, who's staring at a cigarette he's just lit, but isn't smoking—"a hundred feet? And the engine broke down there, and they couldn't get out, and then water started leaking in and filled the sub, and they drowned. They couldn't get out."

Lois shudders, and Claudia gets up and lights a cigarette and walks over to the stereo, changes discs.

"There's a picture of it in the paper," says Shellie. "It was a big thing, not just some little old thing. It was a real submarine," she says.

Nick leans forward and crushes his cigarette in an ashtray and lights another one: takes a puff, his first of the evening. He seems to be coming to life: to be stirring.

"So you just live up in the woods, is that right?" Nick asks Harley. "Up in Canada, with nothing to do but hike and fish?"

"That's right," Harley says. He turns to the women to explain. "They gave me a bunch of money when I hurt my knees and couldn't play anymore. I'm not rich anymore—in fact, I'm poor—but I get by." The women look

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part stricken, part fearful, but also in that dreamlike way, in which Harley can't tell what's real, and what's not—perhaps, though probably not—they look . . . fascinated? Wishful?

Nick crushes his cigarette after the second puff and lights a new one. Willis is looking out at the lake.

"I'd like to do that," Nick says, dreamily. "Move into the woods, just read and write poetry all day." He studies his cigarette, starts to smoke it, then crushes it, too, out. Shellie frowns and casts him a warning glance of some kind, a frown that in no way matches her previously excited, small, lovely, china doll face (she's studying *griffins* at the nearby university, in architecture; she's one of only three or four people in the country studying the stone monsters), and it's a look that neither Harley, nor anyone else, can in any way understand.

"I've never been west of Lexington, Kentucky," says the Wolverine, apropos of nothing. Harley watches as Claudia lowers her eyes.

"I've never been west of Cincinnati," says Jack, still standing, still beaming, as if half-tight, though there's been no drinking: he's just cheery. "I'd like to go some day, though."

"You guys'll have to come visit," says Harley. Nick lights another cigarette, and Willis fiddles with the volume on the stereo, lowers it a bit. Implicit in the still air, unspoken, are money worries, babysitters, masters theses to be finished, jobs, Little League soccer—chains, chains—and already, so late in life.

"At night the salmon move," Nick says, quoting a poem, and Jack smiles, as does Willis, looking at Nick with an undisguised love, undisguised care, and Harley helps Lois and Claudia clean the dishes while Shellie picks up the newspaper and looks at the pictures of the salvaged submarine again.

The men pull their waders on over their jeans right there in the living room—the lake rolling toward them, waves splashing against the stones beneath the porch—

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and everyone says their good-byes, does their hugging.

"Bring home a big one," Claudia says to the Wolverine. No one's supposed to eat any of the fish that come out of the Great Lakes, they've got lead and zinc and shit in them, but the men do it anyway, and the women aren't frightened, either, figuring it's no worse than what they're being sold in the stores.

Jamie twists Harley's hand, trying to hold him, to keep him from leaving.

The men go out to Jack's station wagon—walking like monsters, in their big waders—and climb in awkwardly, and drive away. Harley notices that Nick has fallen into a funk—a trance, almost, since he put the waders on—and for a minute, as they were leaving, Harley did not think that Nick was going to let go of Shellie's hand. They held each other and kissed, lightly, repeatedly, as if Nick might not be coming back or something: and it occurred to Harley that that thought had always to be in the back of Shellie's mind—that one day Nick might try to do it again. He thought about the petite, lively Shellie studying griffins in the library all day—gargoyles, and demons—and felt childish, almost undeveloped, at the thought of how simple his life in the woods was. He had it so easy! All he had to do was chase after Shaw and catch her each time she ran off; that was all.

But out here, in the real world, there are crazy people—people playing for high stakes, people playing for it all—men driven to launch strange inadequate submarines into the lakes and pilot them straight to the bottom, to doom, drowning in graves of water . . . for no reason, and for every reason . . .

Jack drives with the headlights on high beam to watch for deer. The back of the station wagon is overflowing with gear: ice chests, landing nets, boats, poles, tackle boxes, flashlights . . . . Nick sits up front, next to Jack, and Willis sits behind Nick and massages Nick's shoulders, works the kinks in Nick's neck, the way he might rub a woman's shoulders. Harley thinks about Claudia,

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left behind with Jamie, and of how Claudia must have to put on some sort of sham, a semblance of happiness for their child's sake, in the winter, when it comes on, the long Michigan winter-sadness . . .

It's a long drive to the river. Clouds scud quickly past the full moon; there's a strong south wind, though it's still cold outside, almost cold enough to snow. It's like no country Harley's ever been in before—a cold *south* wind? he finds himself thinking—and Jack puts in an old hippie tape, one he's recorded himself—Tom Rush, Tim Buckley and Tim Harden—and Nick lights a cigarette, begins to smoke it, and looks out the window, and lowers his head again. Willis keeps rubbing Nick's shoulders and neck.

"Whatever happened to those guys?" Jack asks, glancing in the rearview mirror: trying to fill the station wagon with his light, his airiness: his strength, thinks Harley. "Didn't they die—didn't something get them?"

The Wolverine nods. "Drugs," he says. "No—alcohol." Willis pauses, trying to remember. "No, a heart attack," he says. "It was one or the other—Buckley OD'ed, and Harden had a heart attack, or maybe it was the other way around."

"What about Rush?" Jack asks. "That still leaves Rush."

Willis shrugs, rubbing Nick's neck again: leaning forward and kneading the thin muscles the way he would a dog's. Harley has the feeling that Nick keeps starting to say something—that he's on the verge, every time he takes a puff of his cigarette—but so far he hasn't uttered a word; he's just smoking. The car smells, Harley thinks, like men—and after living so long with only Shaw, in their small cabin, with no one else around, it feels good. He's pleased.

For a second—as if underwater, as if opening his eyes for the briefest of instants underwater, before shutting them again—Harley thinks he sees, feels, even *understands* why Shaw runs, or rather, what she feels when she

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runs, though he cannot put a name on it. He pauses, tries to hold the feeling, the blurry sight of what it's like, but then he loses it, loses it like a dream, that quickly . . .

"I drove fifteen hours to hear him play one set—one set—at a folk festival in Provincetown, my freshman year," Jack says. "It was worth it. But I haven't heard from him, or of him, in a long time."

Nick's cigarette glows in the front seat, and Nick starts to say something once more, then takes another puff and leans forward, tapping the ashes into the car's ashtray.

"He's alive," Harley says, though he has no idea who Tom Rush is. "I went out on a lake with him in a canoe this summer, up in New Hampshire. Me and my girlfriend, and he and his girlfriend. It was real nice. We had a real good time," Harley says. Harley feels as if he's underwater again, his eyes open, swimming hard, looking for Shaw.

"Did he play?" Jack asks, fascinated. "Did he play his guitar?"

Harley nods. "He played and sang," Harley says. "Loons were crying all around us, diving and bobbing all around the boat, and it was real quiet, right at dusk, and the acoustics were perfect. He sat right out on the bow—we barely all fit—and he played and sang for over an hour."

Jack's watching Harley in the rearview mirror. "Was he still good?" he asks.

"Oh, he was wonderful," Harley says. "It was as lovely an evening as you can imagine. His girlfriend is a friend of my girlfriend's. We went swimming after we came back in to shore, and then Tom fixed pork loins, with some kind of wild raspberry sauce poured over them. He lives in this big castle kind of place with lots of flowers out in the garden, but does his own cooking." Harley's lying like mad, trying to bring Shaw back in to him, and trying to keep Nick from leaping off any bridges, too.

"In the morning we had strawberry waffles. Joni

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Mitchell called and was coming by later that afternoon, but we had to go—we had to be somewhere. He gave us a bunch of his albums, and a jug of maple syrup and wild honey that he'd made.

"He's still alive," Harley says. "He's in good shape."

They ride the rest of the way to the Platte in silence, listening to the tape. It's like they're all five friends now—the four men and Tom Rush, admitted into their circle; five, rather than four now—old Tom, old pork-loin-cooking Tom, one of the guys—Tom Rush, who *survived:* and they listen to the guitar, listen to the tape, and drive through the night, through the dark trees.

Jack reaches over and squeezes Nick's thigh. "Tonight's the night, bucko," he says. "Tonight your luck's going to change. Tonight you're going to catch your first steelhead."

Nick groans, and Willis laughs. "He's been fishing hard all year," he explains, "but he hasn't caught one yet." Nick groans again, and Harley likes, even loves, the fact that there are no secrets among the three friends, that they don't treat Nick like a leper or anything, just because he hasn't caught a single steelhead, hasn't even *hooked* one, while they, Jack and Willis, the Wolverine, have been catching them pretty regularly, all season long. Sometimes two or three in a single night, and always big ones, monsters: adults, spawners, sneaking up the river to lay eggs and spray sperm, then die. Big bulls and sows, blunt nosed, glimmering: marching up the river, at night.

Nick groans again, and finally says what it is he's been trying to say all night, taking one last puff of his cigarette before crumpling it into the tray.

"I should kill myself," he says, looking out the window at nothing. He laughs a mean, lost laugh. Harley's heard the phrase uttered hundreds of times—he's even said it himself a few times—but he's never heard it said the way Nick says it.

They stop at the first bridge and, like children, like

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boys, they get out and sneak along the bridge's railing until they're over the center of the river with their flashlights, and they peek over the edge, shine their lights down into the fast moving shallow water to see if the steelhead are running, to see if they're moving up the river yet. It's not quite midnight.

"I see one," the Wolverine says, pointing. "There!" They all see it then, a dark shadow, like a shark—a big shadow, nearly two feet long—steadying itself in the center of the river, moving slowly up against the current.

They all study the fish for a long time, the flashlight's beam faltering as the battery weakens; then, with a quick flip of its tail, the fish's shadow shoots upstream, and the shallow river is empty again. The men turn and run to the other side of the bridge, the upstream side, but the fish is gone, and there are no others in the river, not at this point, anyway. Jack says, "They haven't really started yet, I'll bet they're still down at the mouth of the river, we can still get into them down there." They hurry, like commandos, back to the car, and get in, and drive again.

When they get to their hot spot, their honey hole—just upstream of where the river enters the lake—there are sucker fishermen, cretins and barbarians, wading at the river's mouth with nets and lanterns, inadvertently blocking the salmon from entering the river as the sucker netters try to catch the more numerous, dumber suckers: a sport for old men and mental patients, Jack tells Harley.

Willis pulls on his boots and wades out into the water and talks to the sucker netters for a while, and then their lanterns go off, and everyone comes wading back in, and the sucker netters—there are three of them—come out of the river, get in their car and drive away.

"What did you tell them?" Jack asks.

"The truth," Willis says, shrugging. "That we had a manic-depressive with us, that he wanted to try and catch a steelhead, that it might be the last year of his life, and that they were blocking the steelhead's return to the river with their stupid lanterns and yo-yo nets."

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"And they *left?*" Jack asks, amazed.

The Wolverine shrugs. "Well, I told them some other things, too."

Harley laughs, and feels like a savage.

There's a long walk through the woods, to catch the sharp bend in the river where the men like to fish. They're headed for a steep bluff on the outside of the bend, and on the inside, there's a shoal and ankle-deep shallows. Between the bluff and shoal is a deep channel that runs down the center of the river. It may be thirty feet deep, says Willis, but may be bottomless, too. That's where the salmon are, moving up and down it, to and from the lake, and the way to catch them is to cast fluorescent yellow and orange marshmallow-looking flies (resembling salmon eggs) into that channel and let them free-drift, hopefully into a salmon's jaws.

"Don't get too near the channel," Willis warns Harley, handing him a fly rod. "It's shallow—no more than waist-deep, all the way out into the current, but then once you step off the shelf *and* into the channel, you'll go straight down, especially in those waders you've got on. Straight to the bottom. We had to pull old Nick out of here twice, last year."

The men are standing in the trees on the far side of the river, downstream of the bend, standing beside an old abandoned hunting cabin, where the river straightens out and is only chest-deep in the middle, where they cross to get over to the other side, the shallows, in order to cast back into the deep center channel.

"Follow our footsteps exactly," Jack says, easing into the river. The stars are bright, all around them. It's so lonely that it's exciting. Harley feels as if something big, something massive, could happen at any second—an asteroid, or a bear attack.

"Don't get out of our footsteps," Willis says, as he and Nick enter the river, behind Jack. "We know exactly where to go."

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Harley can't swim, but with the waders on, it wouldn't matter if he could. He's at the river's mercy, and it's flowing from left to right as he steps into the water behind them. Harley feels like a sea creature returning to the ocean, some evolutionary throwback, trying to reverse history. The water's cold, even through the rubber waders, ice cold, and the current's strong—stronger than he is, Harley can tell in an instant.

The men hold their fly rods over the tops of their heads and cross the mystery spot that they know about, that only they know about, with the water rising quickly above their knees, above their waists, and then almost up to their chests. They take several steps like that, too many, so that surely they are marching toward their doom. The sound of the river is loud in Harley's ears, the river just a foot or so below his chin and trying to sweep him away. But then, like a blessing, like grace, they're climbing out again, and once they're on the other side, it all seems silly, like there was never any danger, and they're ready to fish, they're rigging up their lines, tying on the blaze yellow artificial flies.

Walking through the woods, on his way down to the river, following Nick and the others—ducking branches and trying to avoid the briars in the night—had been exactly like chasing Shaw through the woods at home, Harley thought—exactly. And he had had the feeling, as the men walked in silence ahead of him, that each of them—*each* of them—knew, somehow, intuitively, what Harley was going through—the tremble and terror of Shaw's packing, one box at a time, leaving—and that furthermore, each of the men ahead of him knew, as if they could read his mind, how he chased Shaw through the woods once a month, through the snowdrifts, leaping fallen logs, floundering, and then tackling her and carrying her back.

Harley had the feeling, following the men through the woods, that not only was his secret being read in the minds and hearts of the other men, ahead of him in the

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woods, but that those same men in front of him had gone through the very same thing, had chased their wives before, lost them, chased them, lost them, caught them, let them go, chased them, lost them, found them, let them go, chased them . . . and that the reason no one was saying anything, as they walked ahead of him through those woods, toward the river, with the stars scattered bright above and beyond them, and behind them, was that all men were the same, and there was no need to say anything, no need to speak.

It's a slow night, and they stand in the waist-deep water in the darkness, at the edge of the trough (it's gurgling and splashing, lifting cool air to their faces and pressing against their legs, as if trying to draw them in). They cast their bright yellow flies back and forth into the trough's heart, into the crease, saying nothing, just the four of them in the middle of the woods, in the center of the river, casting back and forth, waiting and staring at the empty cabin on the other side of the river, the bluff side. The dry flies, when they cast them, hang for a second on the back-cast above their heads, yellow flies up in the sky like stars themselves, mixed in with the stars before being launched forward, floating down to the river and then drifting, riding the center of the river's mad rush, waiting to be taken by the cruising steelhead. The men wait on the other end of the thin line, staring into near darkness at the fast black water, waiting for that shoulder-jolt sock, the yank, like an electrocution, that tells them that lure and fish and man have connected. There are hundreds of salmon perhaps, cruising up the middle of the river, up the trough in the darkness, but no way to tell, there's only hope, and the longer the four men go without a bite, the more it feels like the salmon aren't there, like they aren't coming, like it's a bad night, or maybe there aren't even any salmon left anymore, perhaps they're all gone, or uncatchable . . .

It's an hour before the fish hits. "Fish!" cries Jack,

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lifting his rod into a bow, a flexing slender half-circle. Harley's surprised to see that they're so technical about it, crying "Fish!" rather than the more spontaneous, boyish "Got one!" Everyone else reels in and backs up into the shallows to keep from crossing and tangling lines as the big steelhead leaps like some glittering ocean fish, belly silver in the moonlight. Harley leans forward, gaping, imagines he can see the fish's bulging, wild eyes, the gasp of its mouth, the fight of a lifetime, with everything at stake, too much at stake, and Willis and Harley and Nick back all the way up to the sandbar and stand there, poles in hand, and watch as Jack, not grinning for once, passes from wooded shaft of moonlight to moonlight, the moon's tiger-striping light working across his arms, his face, the river. Jack's following the big fish down the river, stumbling sometimes, the fish is running back for the lake so strong and fast, using the center of the river's strong current to help it. Jack splashes through the shallows, trying to stay up with the fish and give it some semblance of a fight—trying to tire it out, first, where he can then reel it in without snapping the thin line, the piano-wire line, the line that the poets in Jack's and Willis's and Nick's art school refer to, in olden poems, as "gossamer." Jack's rushing down the river, trotting through the knee-deep shallows along the sandbar, lifting the rod and trying to slow the big fish's return to the lake . . .

Nine times out of ten, the big fish simply snaps the leader, and is gone (the tiny hook rusts away and falls out of the fish's mouth after a day or two, Willis tells Harley, leaving no one injured, only wiser)—but this time, Jack is able to land the steelhead, is able to wear it down and drag it up on the sandbar.

It's the most beautiful thing Harley's ever seen come out of the water, it's fluorescent red, as they examine it in the flashlight's beam—fluorescent red, and emerald, and stony black and chocolate brown, and moon silver. It's barely alive, nearly dead from the fight, and Willis

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turns the flashlight off, and Jack unhooks the tiny fly from beside the fish's jaw and goes off into the brush to find a stick, a club, and comes back and thwacks it twice, three times, solidly, on the head. The big fish—twelve pounds, maybe thirteen, Jack says, breathing heavily—dies then. It flies up into the stars, thinks Harley, and the corpse remains on the sandbar. Nick stares blankly at the fish, and then lights a cigarette. The other men wade back into the river.

They fish for a long time, with no action—none. Just the motion: casting back and forth, back and forth, but believing, now. Harley glances at his watch, when the moon steps back from behind some clouds—two A.M.—and looks back over at the sandbar, where Nick's still standing, just a silhouette, back in the shadows. Nick's staring off in some non-direction, thinking about something far away, something far away in time as well as space, and simply not moving: almost perfectly motionless, Harley thinks, casting back and forth. Like a statue.

The raccoons prowl back and forth on the sandbar, trilling to one another, as if plotting how to get closer to the fish, hands groping delicately in the cold shallows, feeling for mussels. Their eyes are bright, as they pass through those same tiger-stripe patches of moonlight, and they fix their stares tightly on the men standing in the river, watching them for an instant as if with jealousy, before resuming their probing.

Finally the raccoons are brave enough to be all around Nick—Jack watches, fascinated—but still the raccoons don't touch the fish, though they look at it, and chirr even more excitedly.

Nick stands on the sandbar amongst the raccoons, smoking; all Jack and Harley can see is his silhouette, and the end of his cigarette, glowing.

Harley and Jack go back to fishing. An hour passes, maybe more, and the raccoons leave; Nick does, too—walks down the river, wades across downstream of the cabin, walking without a flashlight, and disappears into

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the woods, headed back to the car. The smell of his cigarette hangs around the river for a while, after he's gone, and then there's nothing: just the cold emptiness of April, waiting to open up into May. And the fish—perhaps—snaking their way, hidden, upstream—ignoring the bright lures, trying to make it past the devil-tempter-men.

"Is Nick okay?" the Wolverine asks Jack. "Do you think we ought to go check on him?"

Jack shakes his head, grimly. There's little doubt that he's replaying the night's fight—the big belly of the steelhead, leaping—the mad pull down the river.

"He's just down, is all," Jack says, feeling the drift of his line, staring out at the river's blackness. "There's nothing we can do."

Harley hears Jack grunt, when the next steelhead hits, and feels, twenty yards downstream, Jack's near-terror, and then pleasure, and then—quickly—determination—as Jack lifts the rod, arches it, sets the hook, and begins the quick shuffling dance, headed Harley's way, down the river, hooked onto another fish.

"Fish," Jack mutters, almost under his breath; and the fish, rising like a rocket, like something bound for outer space, surges. It twists, shakes, rolls, and crashes back into the river, leaps again, but still it's hooked, Jack has it on his line—it's still Jack's fish, Jack *owns* this piece of wildness, and it's a fight, nothing but a fight, and there will be no compromise, the fish is too large; it will be landed, and clubbed, and taken home and eaten (the way it has eaten other fish, all its life)—or it will escape.

"Here," Jack says, sidestepping past Harley, starting downstream after the runaway fish. Line is stripping out with a high, fast clicking sound, a *zing,* the theft of Jack's line, the fish taking Jack's line, and his reel, perhaps, and rod, and even Jack, all the way back to the lake, and even, perhaps, to the sea—"Here," Jack says, holding the bowing rod out to Harley—"take it."

Harley freezes. He's petrified.

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"It's your fish," Harley says, and shakes his head. "No. You go ahead."

"Hurry," Jack insists, "take it."

Harley steps up and takes the bouncing, vibrating rod from Jack's strong hands—Harley's so long ago forgotten that these men are poets that it could be a century ago that he had been told that fact—and what it feels like, to Harley, when he has full possession of the rod and reel—when Jack steps back, smiling—half-pleased, and half-jealous—part proud, and part angry, part sorrowful—part wondering if he'd done the right thing, or a dumb thing—maybe the last steelhead of the season, the last of the year—what it feels like, to Harley, is that he has hooked into a linebacker, that he might as well be standing out on the playing field, having cast his fly toward the jersey of an all-American and that that all-American (again, a linebacker) is running pell-mell down the field, running toward Canada, surging down the center of the river, underwater, running. And Harley, as is his way, digs in and tries to hold the big fish, but it's no good, the fish is too strong, and is going too fast. The line is being stripped off the reel as fast as it can go, and Harley—like Jack before him—begins to run along through the shallows, following the huge fish's flight: raising the rod every now and then, trying to provide some resistance, trying to slow the fish down, but all the fish feels is fear, and Harley stumbles along behind it, his line almost gone, and then, at the end of the sandbar, it is gone. Harley stops, then, digs in, raises the rod, and begins trying to reel the fish back in. He can barely turn the crank, and he wonders, with a shock, if Jack's *stronger* than he is—Jack had been able to land *his* fish—and the fish leaps once, and Harley pulls harder, trying to reel it in, and then there's a soft, earthy pull, and a looseness, like a bad tooth coming out, an emptiness that the tongue quickly runs itself over, feeling that absence, the sad and yet happy absence. In the dark like that, never really having seen anything—just the fish's huge silver form,

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once, leaping, right before it broke the leader—it's a feeling that will give Harley, for months afterward, nightmares. And Harley stands there with the loose line, the empty rod, and swears—*swears,* in his heart—that he can feel the fish (a part of himself, now) still running—out to the lake, already—out to the lake.

On the way home, they stop back off at the upstream bridge, and like children, like boys, the three of them (Nick's stayed in the car) shine their lights down onto the river, and this time they see them—five, six, seven—and then ten, twelve, and maybe more—long dark steelhead, nosing their way up the river, like submarines, moving from rock to rock—surging, and then faltering—dark shadows against the river's stony bottom.

"They're here," Willis whispers, shutting off his flashlight and looking over at Jack, who's shut his light off too and is crouched, looking over the edge, still watching the dark, fishy shadows in the moonlight, breathing heavily, raggedly, like a predator. Like a big cat, thinks Harley, like a tiger.

"Should we tell him?" Willis asks. He wants fish, but he also knows he should get his friend home, that Nick has had enough fishing. That maybe Shellie, in bed, with her smallness and her warmth, and her happiness and her sadness too, can gather him in, and hold him, until the season passes—her textbooks on griffins, on monstrosities, shut and closed, on her desk—and Jack looks crazy, wild-haired, in the moonlight, glancing from Willis to the river, and back. All those fish below, bodies and bodies of fish, just waiting . . .

"We've got to go," the Wolverine says, understanding suddenly—he even laughs a low laugh—almost a mean sound, and yet, with some humor in it—some belief in the future. "We've got to get him home. We've been gone too long already."

"Yes," says Jack, easing up—looking down at the river one more time. "Yes," he says again, sighing (thinking,

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Harley thinks—perhaps—of hunting season, four months distant), and they walk back to the car.

"Well?" says Nick, in a deep, dull voice, a voice from the tomb—his head down between his legs—"Well?"

No one says anything, and they ride home in wet waders, returning, slowly, to earth. The big fish in the back is wrapped in newspaper, like a flower, and smells fishy, but fresh, like the river.

They stop for gas and stale doughnuts at a twenty-four-hour convenience store, brightly lit, more or less in the middle of nowhere: in the middle of the woods. There's just one woman—a young girl, actually—no older than the high school students Jack and Nick and Willis teach—working the cash register, and she's by herself.

The four men stand around the car in their waders and heavy sweaters as Nick, trying to resurface, to revive, fills the car with gas; they are eager to go in and talk to the young girl, who looks so lonely, and who's watching them with bright eyes, with a hard, old-yet-young interest—but they can't abandon Nick.

Moths, a few of them, bounce around against the bright yellow lights over their heads; the convenience store's parking lot, in all its middle-of-the-blackness brilliance, could be a landing spot for flying saucers, and must show up, Harley thinks, on spy satellites in this country, and maybe the world.

Nick shuts the pump off and the four men, in squishing boots, walk in, blinking like owls, and smile at the girl, who grins back, and they begin buying their junk food: old greasy doughnuts and potato chips. Nick buys some more cigarettes and a book of matches, and they all buy beer nuts and acid coffee, all the things men, even poets, eat and drink. Then they stand around and talk to the girl, ask her how her classes are going. She's not in school, it turns out, she's got a little girl, a year old—and the girl, who isn't wearing a name tag, and won't tell them her name, asks if they caught anything.

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"Nope," says Jack, grinning.

It's just a pleasure to be in her company. The men stand there, smiling at her, and Jack buys a lottery ticket, rubs off the numbers, and wins two dollars. The girl smiles. Jack trades the winning ticket in for two more, and hands one to Harley and one to Nick, but neither of them win anything.

"I'll go home with y'all," the girl says. The whole world seems empty, lonely. The men laugh and then chuckle, look down, considering it, and then glance at one another, grin; the girl doesn't understand that there's no chance of this happening, and for a moment she gets her hopes up: it's got to be like having a fish on the line.

"We're married," Jack says, after a long, long time, though that's not it at all—what it is is that it's late, and everyone's tired, and needs a shower and sleep—but Jack says it with a wonderful, sly grin, as if to show that he, and all of them, are considering it. And so the girl smiles, not at all daunted, and says, "Here—take these"—and hands them a big box of doughnuts.

"Why, thank you," says Jack, tipping his baseball cap. The girl beams, delighted with her four new boyfriends—and as they're leaving, Nick stops and takes off his wristwatch—it's silver, and heavy, expensive—and gives it to her.

They drive on into the night—eating old doughnuts—drinking bad coffee.

"She didn't mean all of us," the Wolverine says, his mouth full of doughnut. "She meant any of us. I'll bet she meant you, Nick." Willis reaches up in the front seat and offers Nick a doughnut, and Nick shakes his head.

"Messy," says Jack, grinning, looking back. "Messy, messy." He plugs in the Tom Rush tape, and the sound, the music, comes out clearly, so that they are all thinking about Harley's lie—about being out on the lake with him, perfect acoustics, close enough to touch him—and they are thinking about other things, too.

"Season's over," Jack says, when they reach Nick's

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house and let him out. They all shake hands, even though they'll see him later in the day, only a few hours distant, during, and between classes.

"Next year," Willis says to Nick.

Nick walks around to the back of the car and takes his rod out, and hands it to Willis.

"I want you to have this," he says.

Jack and the Wolverine look at each other.

"Just take it, Wolverine," says Nick, pressing it into Willis's hands. Nick laughs a strange, false, pre-dawn laugh: the kind of laugh that might dissolve into weeping, if Willis doesn't take the rod.

"Thank you," Willis says, and puts the rod back in the car. It's passed from Nick's hands to the Wolverine's. Willis feels as if he's aided in whatever's coming—later, playing it back, he wishes he hadn't—wishes he'd done it another way—thought of the right thing to say, in order to refuse the rod—but that's time gone by, and what he did was to take the rod from Nick.

Nick tries to give Jack his new down vest, which is navy, and gives Nick the illusion of having some bulk, but Jack, who's larger without anything than Nick is with the puffy vest, refuses it, sternly, even angrily. Jack tells him *No* so forcefully that it hurts Nick's feelings, and Nick smiles a strange, sad smile, as if Jack's missing his chance to get in on the ground floor of some unbelievable deal, and he nods good-bye to Jack, who's still bristling, and shakes the Wolverine's hand, and then walks slowly, carrying his vest over his arm like a blanket, through the trees to his dark cottage.

The men watch him go. Each of them imagines Shellie sleeping in the warm, dry house. Harley imagines her in a flannel nightgown; Willis imagines her in sweat pants and a T-shirt; Jack imagines her in a robe, sitting on the edge of the bed, head in her hands, rubbing her eyes, having heard the car drive up, and wondering if Nick's doing all right or not—trying to psych herself up into believing that he is—hoping maybe that he caught a fish.

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Hearing the door open, then, and hearing him come in the house, and knowing instantly that he did not . . .

The three men sit in the car for a second, and watch Nick's house, for no reason, only a feeling—but when no lights come on, they back up and drive away.

It's a bright, windy morning when Willis comes by Harley's room to pick him up about ten minutes before class. Harley's lying on his stomach, snoring, with the windows open, and the curtains are blowing wildly. Harley's dreaming of Shaw's scarves; he's dreaming of their amazing colors, and of the way, sometimes, before she sends them off to a gallery or museum, she'll have them tacked up over the whole side of one of the barn's walls as she sits below them in a lawn chair, at a slight distance, and evaluates them, tries to decide which ones to send: all of them fluttering and snapping in the foreign air, the Canadian wind. In his dream, he's understanding that there are worse things than being deserted, left behind. Harley's understanding that for the first time, and he feels a mild peace.

Willis sits down on the edge of the bed. He shakes Harley's shoulder lightly, and then roughly.

"Wake up, Heine-Man," he says. "Wake up."

They walk to class together. Harley's still wearing what he wore the night before, out on the river, only in sneakers, and he's got a night's beard, but he did wash his face and comb his hair, so that he looks strangely fresh. The cold north wind's invigorating, and again, with no leaves on the trees, and yet no snow on the ground. The wind's stiff, turned around from the north, coming off the lake—the lake the men in the sub drowned in. It feels exactly like fall, and Harley, who still hasn't given the first speck of thought to what it is he is going to talk about, feels like a leaf in the fall, like a leaf tumbling.

He remembers walking back from practices in college,

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with Willis, in weather so cold that their hair, wet from the showers, froze solid. He remembers the clacking sound their hair made as they walked. He remembers being so fucking strong.

Eleven hours, Harley thinks—thirteen, counting the time change—before he sees Shaw, or rather, before he sees their cabin and finds out whether she has finished packing and left him or not: thirteen more hours. Harley tries to think of the class, and of what he might have to offer, but he can't. Then he tries to think of Shaw again, but as they walk, side by side, hands in their pockets, saying nothing, what Harley realizes they are both thinking about is Nick, and his give-away program of the night before.

It's like a fish running for the sea, Harley thinks, trying to stop a thing like that, when someone's got a case of it as bad as Nick does.

"Did you remember to get that fish out of the back?" Harley asks.

"Yes," says Willis, smiling. He looks up, grinning: remembering Jack fighting the fish. Remembers standing in the river himself, in the night, as if he were another creature, as if it were another life. "Sorry you won't be here to eat it," he says.

"Ah," says Harley, coming to life, and looking out at the lake; swinging a big hand at the head of a bare thistle that's grown up along the trail they're walking down. "It was fun just to see it caught."

All the students are there, in class; all dressed in black, all hip and bright eyed, many of them with wet hair clinging from showers—young adults, already—poets, already, and composers, and singers, musicians: flutists, cellists, pianists, bassists. Harley thinks of Shaw: a whole school of little Shaws, or a whole classroom, anyway.

Harley's up at the front of the class; the Wolverine has abandoned him, has deposited him into the class like a brown bear dumping a salmon onto the bank for her cubs

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to feed on; the Wolverine sits at the back of the class with his hands clasped behind his head, red eyed, smiling. Harley's up at the front of the class, he's all alone.

Nick comes by the class, peers in the door, spies Harley up there, alone, and nods good morning to him, and tosses a brown paper bag, a grocery sack, across the room to Harley, and Harley catches it, embarrassed, but does not open it. Nick waves good-bye, and disappears.

Out on the grassy quad, the carillon bells begin to ring. Harley clears his throat and shrugs and looks around the room. He has no idea what to say. It's like the worst of nightmares. Harley glances from student to student, and is terrified to see the suspicion beginning to light in their young eyes, their dark artists' eyes.

Then the Wolverine is walking up to the front of the class, opening windows as he goes. Fresh, cold air swirls into the classrooms. The students turn to watch him.

Willis clears some empty desks out of the way, so that there's even more space around Harley—so that even more, it looks as if the class has Harley trapped.

"This man is strong, stronger than any of us will ever be," Willis says, pointing to Harley as if he's diagramming a poem—talking about the structure, perhaps. "He's got talent, too, but mostly, he's just strong. I thought we'd show you what this man used to do for a living. He was so good at it that in two years of doing this, he made enough money—not that money is any kind of measurement—to last him, if he's frugal, the rest of his life."

"What does he do now?" one of the students—a tall, thin pale boy asks, an inner-city-looking boy with long black hair and a blue jean jacket, a boy that Harley wants to take under his arm and carry back up to Canada and teach to drive fence posts, rather than writing poems or playing the trumpet, or whatever pretty thing it is he does.

"He walks in the woods," Willis says, interrupting Harley before Harley could answer—still pointing to

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Harley with his pointer-stick as if, still, Harley were only a poem. "He makes love to his girlfriend. He gets up early in the morning and goes to bed early. He lives in the woods," Willis says, growing more animated—tapping the pointer in the palm of his hand. "He doesn't have a family, doesn't have any responsibilities, and he doesn't even have a job." Willis taps Harley with the pointer again.

Willis turns and stares out the window. *"He just walks in the woods,"* he says, and then turns back to the class. "If Harley doesn't mind, and if his knees aren't bothering him, I thought we'd demonstrate what he used to do—how he used to block people out of the way, to protect me, while I ran around all over the field, skittering around, more or less, like a chicken with his head cut off." The class laughs, and they lean forward in their seats and look at Willis, and then Harley, and then back at Willis, their teacher.

Willis glances over at Harley, and Harley shrugs and nods.

"I'll be the defender," Willis says, leaning the pointer-stick in the corner. "I used to run with Harley, but today I'll pretend like I'm on the other side, and am trying to get past him: trying to get past him to get to *me.* Pretend there's a running back behind him. That's what I used to be; that's where I used to be.

"Harley's going to block me and keep me from getting behind him. He's going to keep me from getting back there and tackling that runner."

Willis crouches down—he's wearing slick-bottomed street shoes, and Harley realizes this wasn't premeditated. Harley crouches, remembering everything—remembering every practice under the hot fall blue skies, remembering every day with his friend Willis, every day walking back to the dorm after practice, and then remembering the pros, remembering traveling, remembering the namelessness of it, the roaring maw of the stadium crowds, and the way it wasn't so much fun anymore—and

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what it feels like to Harley is that Nick's back there, that he's trying to protect Nick, and even Willis's sad winter-sick wife, Claudia, and their hopeful little girl, Jamie—everyone who ever mattered a damn is slipping in behind Harley, getting back there behind him and hiding, for protection: everyone but Shaw, who doesn't need Harley anymore, who's gone. In no way can Harley feel Shaw back there anymore, hiding behind him, seeking protection—she's ready to go out on her own, and has, he realizes, already done so.

And for the next half hour or so, as the class watches, fascinated, the two men, Harley and the Wolverine, struggle and clash like dinosaurs: feinting, and shuffling back and forth, locking in combat, crashing back and forth into one another—Harley knocking the Wolverine to the ground repeatedly, and each time, tenaciously, near-growling, the Wolverine coming back harder and faster, feinting, faking, trying to slip past Harley, trying to get behind him . . . but he can't, he doesn't, Harley's still got it, and it's why they paid him so much . . .

Finally, both men can't go on any longer, and they stand, half bent over, gasping, sweat streaming down their foreheads, down their chests. Their shirts stick to them, damp across the backs, across their tight chests, and they just stare at each other, panting, not yet friends again.

The class—the poets and flute players—begin to applaud, which snaps Harley and Willis out of the breath-gasping, not-quite-friends stares they were locked into with each other; Willis straightens up from his crouch first and picks up the pointer, and then Harley straightens up.

"Talk," Willis says, tapping Harley with the pointer. "Talk your heart out."

"I never learned to let anything go past me," Harley says, gasping as if for his life. "I have to learn to let things go past." Harley shrugs. "I have to go against my instinct. I still have to learn that." Harley's breathing like

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a locomotive, and still sweating wildly, as if being tortured. "It takes me years and years to learn things," he says.

The students listen to his confession raptly.

"I learn with my body quickly," Harley says, "but I learn with my mind slow. It's almost impossible," he says. "To let something go.

"I was the best there was at not letting anything get past," Harley says. "I was too damn fucking good. It turned me into a fucking *crustacean.*"

Willis nods proudly, as if Harley has found out something that Willis has known all his life: and yet as if Harley has also reminded Willis of a forgotten secret, a great mysterious one.

"Show and tell," Willis says to the class, still breathing hard. "Next we'll *touch* this man, to see what it's like to be as strong as he is." Willis walks over to Harley and begins unbuttoning Harley's shirt, and helps Harley out of it—Harley's breathing hard, too tired to protest—and he's too lost, as well, in the memories—the hitting, the blocking, the *defending.*

The cool air, sweeping in through the windows, feels wonderful. Willis hands Harley the shirt, and Harley wads it up and towels off with it, dries himself; then sits down.

"Come on," Willis says, motioning to the class—pointing to a black girl first, and then to the pale boy behind her, and then to the girl behind him, a tall shy girl with large glasses and lots of red hair: a poet. "Come *on,*" Willis urges, gesturing them up with the pointer. "Don't be shy. Come feel him."

One by one—starting with the black girl, who's wearing a white blouse, navy skirt, and navy sweater—the other students fall in line behind her—they walk past Harley and touch the parts of him (as he sits there heaving, panting, shoulders rising and falling, heart racing) that they want to touch.

The black girl cups her hands over the smooth round

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melons of Harley's chest, then strokes his bull neck with her fingers lightly, and passes on, out the door. The pale boy touches one of Harley's blood-filled arms, carefully at first, but then taps it—again, as if it's a melon, a ripe fruit—and then squeezes it with both of his hands; grins. "A *crustacean,* man," he says, and then moves on.

The tall girl with all the red hair and big glasses crouches down and feels Harley's face, his jaw, and then runs her hand down the still-flatness of his bare stomach: and growing more confident, more familiar, pats it twice, the way she might pat a puppy's stomach.

The whole class moves past him, a procession, in this manner, and still breathing hard, Harley closes his eyes, and remembers the days in the stadium, all the days leading up to this one—and all the days that lie ahead of him, with or without Shaw—and finally feels that he has earned his money, the fifteen hundred dollars.

He sits there with his eyes closed after the last student has left the room—after it is just Harley and Willis again—the two of them sitting alone in the classroom, the windows open, and both of them purged, so that it could be twenty years ago again and both of them just hanging out in a classroom, a classroom in Ohio after chemistry lecture, and before spring practice. A single fly buzzes in the room, high against the warm glass of the open window, and spring is coming hard, spring coming to northern Michigan, right up on the Canadian line, and Harley glances at his watch; he's still got an hour or so before his plane leaves, and so they just sit there a while, heads leaned back like reptiles, resting, just breathing.

"What's in the bag?" Willis asks, after a while.

Harley leans forward, slowly, and looks inside it, and smiles, shakes his head.

"A shirt," he says. "A fancy white button-down dress shirt."

"Put it on," Willis says, lazily.

Harley stands up and tries it on. It's too short in the sleeves, it's tight under the arms and especially across the

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chest—the fabric stretched tight, and buttons straining to pop—but it's a sharp, crisp, clean white shirt, and it will do well for the flight back home, where Shaw may or may not be waiting. Harley looks down at the new shirt, which smells like Nick, which makes him feel, in that secret way that another's clothing can do, that he *is* Nick, only without Nick's sadness—and he smiles. Willis reaches in his pocket and takes out the check—the $1500—and hands it to Harley.

"He's been trying to give his stuff away for two weeks now," Willis says, when they get to the airport. It may be twenty years again before the two men see each other—men, and all people, are just that way—and Harley shakes his head, looks down at his feet.

"Do you think he'll do it?" Harley asks.

The Wolverine's very quiet, very somber. Finally he shrugs, looks up at his big friend. "I don't know," he says. "It's not something I, or anyone, has any control over. Shit," Willis says, looking helpless for the first time that Harley can remember, "it's a force of nature. Either he will, or he won't. I've got no control over it."

Harley nods, distractedly—tugs once more on the sleeves, which are trying to creep up his thick forearms, and leans forward and hugs the Wolverine hard; for a second, it looks as if they are wrestling. Then Harley turns and goes through the boarding gate, and gets on the plane as if it is waiting for him—just waiting.

Five years later, Harley—still in fair shape—finds himself out on one of the San Juan islands, with two women. One of the women is someone whom Harley's only just begun seeing, dating; the other is a married woman, a friend of Harley's new woman friend. Shaw's been gone forever. Harley still misses her. His arms, still huge, remind him of what a fucking crustacean he is. And though he has not talked to the Wolverine since he last saw him five years ago, Harley still sometimes watches

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the mail, waiting to hear how Nick is, or isn't, doing. And hearing nothing, he has to assume that all is well: that they're still taking care of him, holding him, all still taking care of each other—and that maybe Nick is better. No news is almost like good news, Harley thinks. Nothing's gotten past. He doesn't think it has, anyway.

It's May, and windy as hell up on the top of the hill they're looking out from. There are islands all beyond them, humped islands, like the backs of animals, islands out in the straits of Juan de Fuca. They're on Friday Harbor Island, and out to the west is Chatham Island, and to the north, Victoria Island and Canada.

It's cold. They've all got on coats. The three of them are sharing one pair of binoculars, and are watching for killer whales—orcas—which sometimes blunder into the strait and get trapped, biologists think, turned around in their migrations, though other biologists think the whales come in among the islands for protection from the Pacific storms.

Harley and his two friends aren't seeing any whales, however. Instead, they watch the huge ships that nose slowly through the Inside Passage. The water is bright blue. Just scant miles away is Vancouver, where many of the people speak a foreign language, Harley thinks—French.

It's all still so exotic to him, he thinks—everything. Whales, and foreign languages, and so much new country—so much new *shit,* everywhere, he thinks. He can't figure out what the two women want with him—why they are interested in him, when he is so simple. He feels he has no complexity whatsoever, and understands almost nothing.

He feels how firm and cold the ground is, beneath his sturdy legs, his heavy boots.

"I can't make out the words on that tanker," Ginny, the married woman, says, peering through the glasses. She's in her late forties, only a year or two older than Harley, and attractive.

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Willa, Harley's friend, is thirty.

"D-O-C—" Ginny begins . . .

The wind picks up, blurs the image through the binoculars, and Ginny hands them to Harley, and rubs her eyes. "It looks like DOCEN-something," she says.

Harley squints out at the tanker. It looks foreign, somehow, though he can't tell why—and he can't tell if it's coming or going, though he has a feeling—again, somehow—that it's going. "D-O-C-E-N-C-L-A-V-E?" he says hopefully, guessing: half bullshitting, half making it up—only half believing in himself, and what he's seeing.

"It could be N-A-V-E," says Willa, who's worked on a fishing boat up in Alaska. "Navy. Could be Liberian registry, or Panamanian." Willa's light on her toes, twisting and jumping in the wind, *fresh,* and doesn't seem to feel the sadness that Harley and Ginny are feeling—feeling, and trying not to show, or even acknowledge. She—Willa—turns her face up toward Harley's, who's still squinting through the binoculars, and says, "We could call up the customs office, and ask them there, when it passes through—we could find out where it's from, where it's been."

Willa turns again, catches her hat in the wind. "I'm always doing stuff like that, wasting money on long-distance calls," she says. "Here," Willa says, reaching for the binoculars, "let me see." Harley hands them to her. The wind's cold.

"D-O-E-N-A-V-E," Willa spells: her eyes so much clearer than Harley's, or Ginny's. But she still doesn't know what it means—none of them do. Willa takes Harley's hand in hers, and squeezes it, twists her fingers around his; hands the binoculars to Ginny.

Ginny's still watching the ship, but not with the binoculars: She's just watching it, as if she's about to go to it; as if she's got a ticket on it, or as if she's employed on that ship, and missed the port of call. She's watching it like it's *her* ship.

"Don't you ever wish you could just get on a ship like

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that?" she asks, and Harley feels pretty sure she's talking just to him. "Wouldn't it be great if you could just jump on a ship like that and ride, and go wherever it's going?"

She's speaking as if in a trance, and turns, with her eyes watering in the wind, and looks up at Harley—half-happy and half-hopeful: imagining it.

"Yes," says Harley, understanding, finally.

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NOTICE

After seeing this magazine through perhaps its most rewarding years, Deborah Pease, its publisher, has decided to leave us. She became the publisher in the fall of 1982, the fourth publisher in the magazine's history, which goes back to 1953. She was the first truly literary person to hold the post—a novelist *(Real Life),* a short story writer *(The New Yorker)* and a poet *(The Feathered Wind)* whose work has appeared in a number of literary magazines, indeed first in *The Paris Review.* When she accepted the position she sent the editors a note: "I owe a great deal to the dedication of editors, lovers of art and literature. I know the solitariness of an artist and the wild joy of a single act of recognition. *The Paris Review* recognizes life in all its creative expressions—despair, delight, rigor, craziness, the erotic and the aesthetic . . . and the fine sobriety of a formal interview. It helps to shatter—to paraphrase Kafka—the frozen sea within us. I feel honored to be its publisher."

Those of us at the magazine, of course, have felt honored to have worked with her. In no period of its existence has it been able to bring out as much "creative expression" as during her tenure. The forty issues printed while she was the publisher give ample evidence

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of this. The number of pages in each issue rose by over a quarter. Her particular concern was to give more space to women writers—not only in the interview series (eighteen women authors were talked to about their craft) but in the fields of fiction and poetry. Being a poet herself, she gave particular attention to this department. The one hundredth issue contained the work of forty-nine poets, the thirty-fifth Anniversary issue, twenty-six. What she referred to as the "wild joy of recognition" was accorded to many who were first published in the magazine—including Jay McInerney, Mona Simpson, Charlie Smith, Rick Bass, Edward P. Jones among the fiction writers, many more among the poets. She herself was responsible for bringing to the magazine the extraordinary "lost" chapter from Mary McCarthy's autobiography, in which the author described her marriage with Edmund Wilson. Perhaps our publisher's most memorable decision was to refuse a considerable grant from the National Endowment for the Arts—a question of "conscience" as she wrote in explanation in these pages . . . a symbolic protest against the much publicized restrictive wording, amounting to censorship, in the terms of the grants. For this stand on principle, she was awarded the 1990 Open Book Award for First Amendment Courage from the American Society of Journalists and Authors.

What will be missed here is her enthusiasm, her wise counsel, her concern for the well-being of editors and staff. Fortunately, she has promised to keep to a close relationship—so that at least in part the spirit and energy brought to the magazine ten years ago will continue to be felt.

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A sad note. Harold (Doc) Humes died on September 10. He (with Peter Matthiessen) was a founder of this magazine in 1953. Once it was launched he moved on, back to the U.S. where at Harvard he took Archibald MacLeish's famous S course on creative writing. But he kept in touch. A constant presence. Matthiessen remembers a visit in Amagansett, L.I. where "day after day Doc would hold forth, brilliantly and exasperatingly, on the nature of literature, including the poor quality of the work then being done by his contemporaries, until finally I burst out—*if you know so much, why don't you write your own damned novel*—something paltry like that. Infuriated, he yelled, 'I will!' and rushed out of the house. Six weeks later—that's the figure that sticks in my mind: it may have been more, but not much more—he turned up in Hiram Hadyn's office at Random House with the first draft of a very long novel that became *The Underground City.* For those who have been known to spend ten years on a single novel, this virtuosity is absolutely stunning."

The Underground City, a seven-hundred-fifty-page novel about collaboration and espionage set in Paris during the war, was published in 1957 to enthusiastic reviews. This was followed by *Men Die* (1959) about troubles on a nuclear-stockpiled Caribbean island. It was also highly praised. Indeed, in his early thirties Humes was considered one of the most promising writers of his generation. But then it all stopped. Humes said the trouble started when he "collided with British intelligence" in the early sixties. Apparently he "knew too much." He told friends that while he was asleep in Barnstead Hospital in Sussex, England (a place he referred to as a "brain laundry") a microwave implant so small that it could be put on the point of a hypodermic needle had been settled into one of his teeth. He became what the French called "teleguidé." Among other manifestations, it closed down his ability to write. It made him physically ill to try. Actually, his friends felt something else was responsible

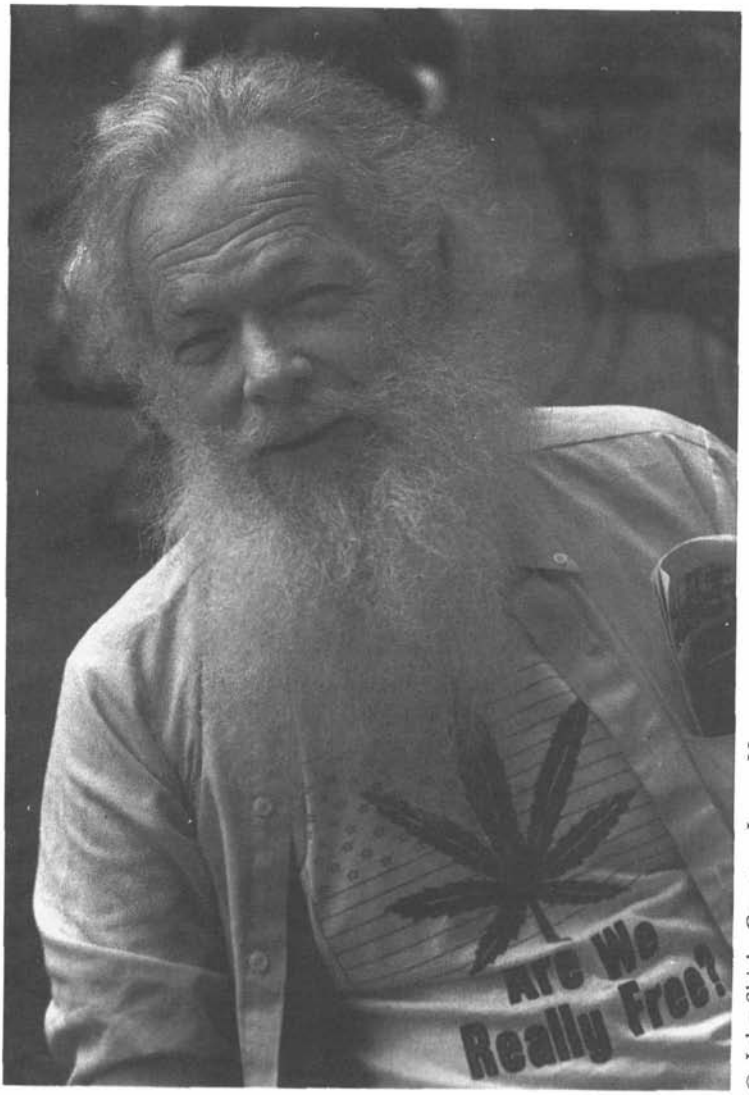
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for the shutdown—psychological changes caused by his experiments in England with LSD.

Whatever, his voice was hardly quieted. He became a kind of underground activist. Mostly in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he held forth, lectured really, on his unconventional views. Of special concern was what he referred to as "global mischief"—the villains being "international nationalists who since World War II have been trying to keep nations at each other's throats." His function was to bring such shenanigans to the attention of whomever would listen. There is a description of this in "The Paris Review Sketchbook," published in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue: "He subjects his friends, invariably by telephone, to constant calls to alarum. He can be very convincing. One of his friends said, 'As I listened to him my stomach was in a knot. I kept remembering Gore Vidal's wry description of a paranoid as someone who knows *all the facts.*'

"What is particularly fascinating about the phenomenon of Humes's plug-in to international mischief is that he has an ally—a black monitoring box circling the earth put up by a group of MIT engineers shortly after the nuclear infestations started after World War II. Apparently, the scientists felt that humankind had to be watched by a kind of detection device to warn the populace of excesses and what the U.S. Constitution refers to as 'public danger.' Thus the black box is a variety of doomsday clock. It even has a name—Fido—described as a complex set of computers that have the 'characteristics of a St. Bernard's dog and the tactical inventory of Lassie.' However, the box is not straightforward; it does not broadcast warnings that anyone can hear, but instead produces a number of signs or portents that must be interpreted. Humes sees himself as a self-appointed watchman, a kind of cosmic tea-leaf reader. Cloud formations, electrical failures, hailstorms in summer, water shortages, gypsy moth infestations, train derailments, huge starling flocks, the red tide off Newport . . . any

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© John Shick. Courtesy Immy Humes

phenomena of this sort were cosmic messages manifested by the black box and 'sent down' for Humes to interpret. He called these messages "thumpers." One summer he spent aloft in a room high in New York's Essex House reading portents in the cloud formations drifting over Manhattan. He would then call his friends to explain to

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them why they should reach their congressmen or senators and convince them to convene so that he (Humes) could explain to these men of consequence and power what was happening. His monologues over the phone are long, non-stop, brilliant . . .

"Sometimes Humes takes matters into his own hands. On one occasion, he told friends, with a terrible war imminent (according to Fido), he sat down in a chair in the middle of his room and acted as an intermediary between the CIA and the KGB, both of whom had bugged his room. Humes talked to both sides, swiveling his head and speaking into the respective hidden microphones, for over an hour, until he was able to persuade the upper echelons to come to their senses: the cataclysm was averted."

Very often in those days, his phone calls would come to *The Paris Review*—always fascinating, especially to the interns. Bewildered (after they had finally hung up the phone) they would turn to the more senior editors for explanation.

In his last days (he was suffering from pancreatic cancer) he called the magazine more frequently. He said he wanted to come back to the *Review,* "come home" as he put it. He suggested a party. He asked to have his old friends from the Paris days on hand. He offered a rather morbid scenario—drinks, good food, a carnival-like jollity to the evening, presumably a dissertation or two from him, and he would then retire to an adjoining room where he would end it. When it was pointed out that his "old friends" would become accessories if they were party to such a thing, he laughed and said, "Well, forget the last part."

So there were a couple of lunches. His daughters led him slowly up the stairs. Most of the old friends could not be on hand—Matthiessen, for one, was in Siberia on the trail of the rare East Asian crane. The medicine Humes was taking for his illness seemed to make him less startling to listen to—though at one point he did mention

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that a thousand tennis players in the Soviet Union were secret agents. He talked, of course, about cannabis, which he felt had enormous therapeutic and recuperative powers. It was a favorite topic, indeed a crusade that had gotten him into trouble with the authorities. He reminisced about playing chess in Paris with Tristan Tzara, the Dadaist; he remembered that in the Metro Cafe Jimmy Baldwin had told him that Paris at that time (1951) had the right people and was the right place to start a literary magazine; he described a meeting with Albert Einstein at his home in Princeton. The scientist was dressed like a hippy ("he had on exactly what I had on") and after the two had talked for a while drifted off into one of his famous "thinks."

Sometimes at the luncheon, Doc would drift off á la Einstein, but then something would stir in his memory. He described being thrown out of jail; he said mysteriously that the summer of 1967 was the "summer of love"; he told us that what was wrong with his generation was the "grey flannel suit."

He died a couple of weeks later. A bylined obituary appeared in *The New York Times.* So did an essay. A long piece in *The New York Observer.* A reporter working on yet another story called to say that considering how often Humes's name cropped up he was astonished that he was not listed in *Who's Who.*

The memorial service was held in the St. James Chapel of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The place was filled, a cross-section of those he had touched, many young, one long-haired man with a parrot on his shoulder. Two of his daughters (he had four, and two sons) spoke from the pulpit. So did others. An old friend—illustrating Humes's encyclopedic memory and his love of holding forth with brilliance on any subject—remembered an occasion at a table at the Café Royale in Saint-Germain when Doc broke a temporary silence: "Someone ask me a question," he had said. "I feel like explaining something."

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After the service, friends gathered in a daughter's apartment overlooking the Hudson River. They crowded into the largest room and seated themselves on the floor to hear more. David Amram, the composer, played flute-like instruments. One young man, obviously troubled by the excesses of the sixties, recalled haltingly how Doc had rescued him, becoming such a part of his therapy that in his wanderings through the hippy culture of the West trying to find himself, he actually felt Doc was a corporeal entity traveling with him. When he came east many years later, he sought out Humes in Cambridge to thank him for his help out there . . . astonished when Doc told him that he had never been west of the Mississippi.

So that is how we will remember him here—funny, loopy, generous, warm-hearted, a wayward genius . . . still a presence although he has gone.

—GAP

The Paris Review is pleased to announce its 1992 prizewinners:

The Aga Khan Prize for Fiction has been awarded to Joanna Scott for "A Borderline Case," which appeared in issue 123.

The Bernard F. Conners Prize for Poetry has been awarded to Tony Sanders for "The Warning Track" to be published in a future issue.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Rick Bass's most recent work is the book-length essay, *The Ninemile Wolves.* He is also the author of *The Watch,* a collection of stories, and *Oil Notes,* an essay collection. His stories have appeared in *Esquire, Antaeus* and many other magazines and anthologies. He lives in Montana.

Dan Leone's work has been published in *Columbia, The Crescent Review* and *The Quarterly.* He lives and works in San Francisco where he plays ukelele in a band called Ed's Redeeming Qualities. Their latest album is *It's All Good News* (Flying Fish Records).

Barry Lopez's non-fiction work *Arctic Dreams* won the 1986 National Book Award. He has written essays, novels and a collection of short stories, *Winter Count.* Vintage will publish his book-length essay, *The Rediscovery of North America,* this year.

Paul West is the author of many novels, including *The Women of Whitechapel* and, most recently, *Love's Mansion. Portable People,* an illustrated collection of biographical sketches, was published by Paris Review Editions.

Laura Yeager is a 1989 graduate of the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop and a Pearl Hogrefe Writing Fellow. She won third prize in the *Cosmopolitan* fiction contest in 1985. This is her first publication.

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POETRY

Susan Abraham, a criminal defense lawyer, lives in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. Her poems have been published in *Poetry, Denver Quarterly* and *Tikkun.*

Dick Barnes teaches medieval literature and creative writing at Pomona College in California. He plays rubboard, writes lyrics and sings for the Real Time Jazz Band. His books include a poetry collection, *A Lake on the Earth,* and *The Real Time Jazz Band Songbook.*

Molly Bendall is the author of *After Estrangement,* a collection of poems. She teaches at the University of Southern California.

Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) was an Argentine poet, short-story writer and essayist. His poems in this issue are taken from *The Iron Coin* (1976) and *History of the Night* (1977). His translator, **Robert Mezey,** teaches at Pomona College. His translations of Borges have appeared in many journals. *Evening Wind*, his most recent book of poetry, won a PEN prize and the Bassine Citation in 1987. **Dick Barnes,** one of whose poems appears in this issue, collaborated with Mezey on the translation of "The Inquisitor."

George Bradley recently completed his second collection of poetry, *Of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.* He has received the Witter Bynner Prize from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He lives in Connecticut.

Carl Buchanan teaches English at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. *The Kansas Quarterly* will publish several other "Jack the Ripper" monologues in 1993.

Sarah Getty has published poems in *The New Republic* and *Shenandoah* and eight short stories in the *Iowa Review.* She lives in Bedford, Massachusetts and is a project director for the New England Foundation for the Humanities.

Steven Graves has published over thirty poems in a variety of journals and is at work on his first book of poetry. He is a faculty member at Harvard medical school and lives with his wife and children near Boston.

Edward Hirsch is the author of three books of poems: *For the Sleepwalkers, Wild Gratitude* and *The Night Parade.* He teaches English at the University of Houston.

John Hollander's *Selected Poems* and *Tesserae* will be published this spring by Knopf. He has won the Bollingen and Levinson prizes, is a MacArthur Fellow and teaches English at Yale University. His most recent book of criticism and theory is *Melodious Guile* (Yale University Press). He lives in Connecticut.

Martha Hollander, who was the 1989 recipient of the Walt Whitman Award, is the author of *The Game of Statue.* She is a development associate

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at the Library of America and teaches art history. She lives in Forest Hills, New York.

Andrew Hudgins is the author of *After the Lost War* and *The Never-Ending.* He teaches English at the University of Cincinnati.

T.R. Hummer has been named a 1993 Guggenheim Fellow. He is the author of *The 18,000-Ton Olympic Dream* and edits *The New England Review.*

Caroline Knox's books of poetry include *The House Party* and *To Newfoundland.* Her poems have appeared in *The American Scholar, Poetry* and *The New Republic.* She received an NEA grant in 1986 and teaches English at the University of Connecticut at Avery Point.

James Laughlin is the publisher of New Directions. His *Collected Poems* will be published this fall by Moyer Bell. *Angelica,* a novella, will be published by Grenfell Press in November.

Gail Mazur has published two collections of poetry, *Nightfire* and *The Pose of Happiness.* The poems included in this issue are from her new manuscript, *The Common.* She heads the Writing Committee of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts and is the founder and director of the Blacksmith House Poetry Series. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

J.D. McClatchy's most recent collection of poems is *The Rest of the Way.* He was awarded the Annual Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets in 1991 and serves as editor for *The Yale Review.*

Gary Mitchner teaches English at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. One of his poems appeared in *The Best American Poetry 1991.*

Pam A. Parker lives in Manhattan and works on Wall Street as a computer programmer. Her work has appeared in *Conditions, Semiotext(e) USA, Kenyon Review* and *The Persistent Desire.*

Robert Phillips's most recent poetry collections are *Personal Accounts: New and Selected Poems* and *Face to Face.* In 1987, he won an Academy Institute Award in literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He directs the creative writing program at the University of Houston and acts as a special consultant for *The Paris Review.*

Kenneth Rosen teaches English at the University of Southern Maine and is the author of *The Hebrew Lion* and *Longfellow Square.*

Maureen Seaton is the author of two books, *The Sea among the Cupboards* and *Fear of Subways.* Her work has appeared in *Ploughshares, Kenyon Review, Iowa Review, Missouri Review* and *The Atlantic.* She holds the title of Artist-in-Education for the Illinois Arts Council and received the 1990 Eighth Mountain Poetry Prize.

Mark Strand is the author of *The Continuous Life* and *Dark Harbor,* a book-length poem to be published by Knopf in 1993. He was Poet Laureate of the United States in 1990.

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Charles Wright's most recent book is *The World of the Ten-thousand Things.*

INTERVIEWS

Anne Cattaneo (John Guare interview) is the dramaturge of Lincoln Center Theater. She created the Chekhov short-story project *Orchards,* for which Chekhov's stories have been adapted for the stage by John Guare, David Mamet, Spalding Gray and others. She translates Brecht, Strauss and other twentieth-century German playwrights.
James Lipton (Neil Simon interview) is the author of *Mirrors,* a novel, and a work of nonfiction, *An Exaltation of Larks.* He is a Broadway playwright, lyricist and producer, and a writer and producer of motion pictures and television.

FEATURE

John Barth is the author of many novels, including *Giles Goat-Boy, The Sot-Weed Factor* and, most recently, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor.* He teaches at the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars.

ART

John Currin was born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1962 and lives in New York. His paintings have been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Galerie Rudiger Schottle, Paris and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.
Zoe Leonard was born in New York in 1961 and lives in New York. Her photographs have been shown at University Art Museum, Berkely, Galerie Gisela Captain, Cologne and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.
Alexis Rockman was born in New York in 1962 and lives in New York. His paintings and watercolors have been recently shown at Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg and Sperone Westwater Gallery, New York.

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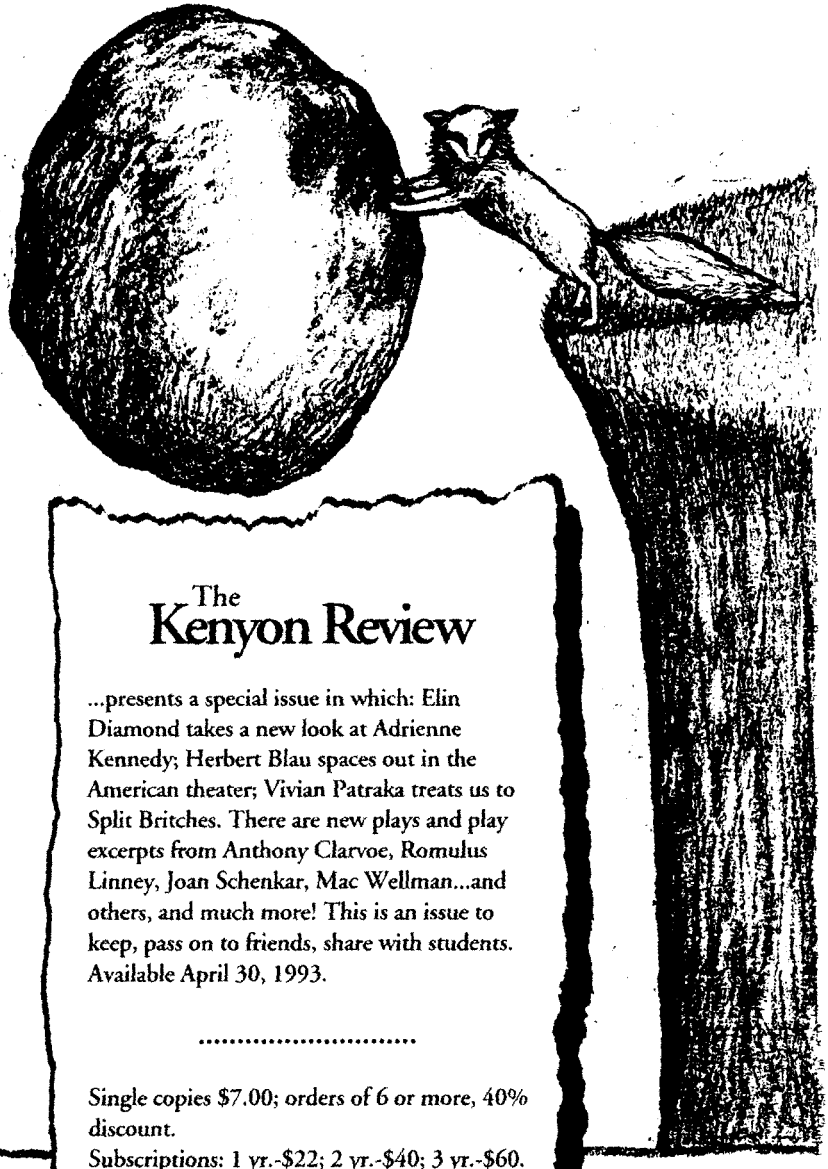
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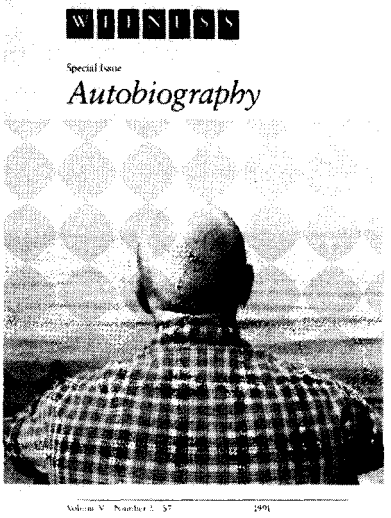
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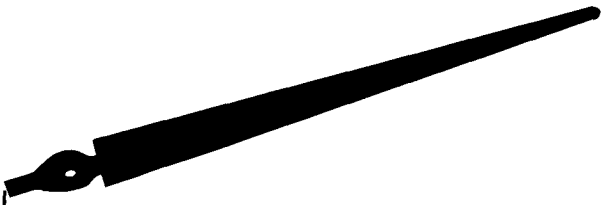
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Dear Mr. Plimpton
Thank you for your wonderful note. I have thought about it for a long time because it means a lot to me to be the youngest associate of the Paris Review. But I am now eight years old, so I have decided I would like for my younger sister, Lucia, to be the youngest associate. Lucia will be six in November. We don't have the money right now, but we promise to send you one thousand dollars before January, 1995.
Lucia wants to know if she can go to the party next time.

One of your associates,
Delia
Rollow

As the above response to a recent solicitation of our supporters illustrates, there are no age requirements for becoming an Associate of The Paris Review—*all that is required is the will if not the way! Our "Associates" are those who have made a valuable financial contribution toward the welfare of an enterprise of historical significance and continuing value to the literary community. Delia Rollow understands this. So does her younger sister, who is now six. They are entitled to invitations to literary parties, readings, galas, symposiums, life-time subscriptions as well as the occasional newsletter. Perhaps best of all is the knowledge they are giving a helping hand to a worthy institution. Won't you join the Rollow sisters and their fellow associates?*

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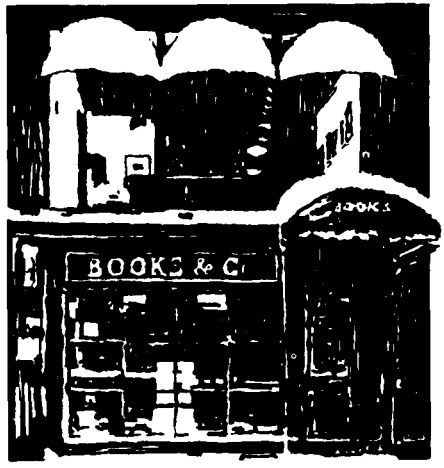
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—Gustave Flaubert,
in a letter, 1858

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